

# Study ties stroke risk, southern African-Americans

NEW ORLEANS (AP)—Blacks in the South apparently get a double whammy of stroke risk: They die at much higher rates than either Southern Whites or Blacks who live elsewhere.

Researchers have long known that stroke deaths are greater among Blacks and people in the "Stroke Belt" across the eastern part of the nation's midsection. But they thought the combined risk posed by race and geography was small.

"Much to our surprise, the finding is: No, it's not," said George Howard, a biostatistician who presented his research Wednesday at an American Stroke Association conference in New Orleans.

The rate of stroke deaths among Black men in the South was 51 percent higher than it was among Blacks in other parts of the country. And Black men in the South

had roughly four times the risk of dying of a stroke as White men living outside the South.

"That's a pretty big difference," Howard said.

Howard, chairman at the University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Public Health, compared stroke deaths in 10 Southern states to those in 11 non-Southern states with large enough Black populations to make comparisons possible, including California, Texas and New York.

He used information from the National Center for Health Statistics from 1997 through 2001, and adjusted it to take into account how many Blacks and Whites live in each state.

Among White men ages 55 to 64 living in the South, the stroke death rate was 49 deaths per 100,000 people—29 percent higher than the

rate among White men living elsewhere. Among Black men in the South, the rate was 159 deaths per 100,000 people, compared with 105 for Black men living elsewhere.

Trends were similar among women.

Leading theories for the racial and geographic differences are that Southerners are more likely to smoke, be overweight, have high blood pressure, and be in poor general health. Lack of good medical care also may be involved.

"Some of those Stroke Belt states are some of the poorest in the country," said

Dr. Joseph Broderick, chairman of neurology at the University of Cincinnati School of Medicine.

As for whether moving from the South would help, that is not clear at all.

"I was brought up in what's called the buckle of the Stroke Belt," and then moved to Alabama, Howard said. "Did I bring the risk with me or did I leave it in eastern North Carolina?"

The National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke funded his study and another presented at the conference which found that Whites were twice as likely

as Blacks to have "prehypertension," a new category the government set last year for mildly elevated blood pressure — a reading of 120 to 139 over 80 to 89.

But Blacks with prehypertension were far more likely to suffer strokes or heart disease as a consequence, the study of more than 80,000 around the country found.

"The population should be aware of this category and know that this is a new risk," said Daniel Lackland, an epidemiologist at Medical University of South Carolina in Charleston.

Blood pressure drugs are not recommended for prehypertension unless people have diabetes or other conditions. Instead, doctors urge people to watch their diets and salt intake.

Other studies at the conference hinted that genetic differences may play a role in higher stroke risks for Blacks. Three separate teams found that stroke victims were more likely to have variations in a potential "stroke gene" recently identified in Iceland. One of the teams found that such variations were more common in Blacks than in Whites.

## Report: AIDS on rise in Black community

LOS ANGELES (AP)—Blacks make up more than half of new HIV infections annually in the United States and about two-thirds of new AIDS cases among teens, though they represent less than 15 percent of the nation's population, according to a report released Tuesday.

The report, titled "The Time is Now!," was released to coincide with the beginning of Black History Month. It is based on statistics related to HIV and AIDS among Blacks from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the Kaiser Family Fund and the U.S. Congress, among other sources.

Funding for the primary federal AIDS program has remained steady in the last three years while the number of media stories about AIDS declined by 57 percent between 1997 and 2002, according to the report, produced by the Black AIDS Institute, a Los Angeles-based research and public policy group.

The institute called on Congress to increase funding for AIDS and HIV treatment, control the cost of medications, provide more comprehensive sex education in schools and urge more states to adopt needle exchange programs.

## Fletcher

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What does it mean to come out against someone such as Rice? Does opposition give aid and comfort to our enemies? In the silence, what does it mean to remain quiet?

The silence of Black America in the face of the Rice confirmation hearings could be spun in any number of directions. More importantly it ends up representing an unresolved internal conflict over the question of who truly represents the interests of Black America, and, indeed, what those interests are. In an era where the "Whites only" signs have been removed and corporate America has CEOs and board members that hail from Black America, defining "our" interests actually has global implications.

In today's world, as uncomfortable as it may be to speak up and challenge those of our own who have emerged, the alternative has far worse implications. As we should have learned in the aftermath of the appointment of Justice Clarence Thomas, we as African-Americans have to stop making excuses and apologizing for those pursuing interests contrary to those of the majority of Black America. We must call it as it is, rather than as we might wish it to be in some other world that never existed.

Bill Fletcher Jr. is president of TransAfrica Forum.

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