

Talking with Dr. Hilton M. Hudson About The Black Man's Guide to Good Health

By Brigette Settles Scott, MA

Closing the Gap, Men's Health • September/October 2001

As a practicing cardiac surgeon and currently the clinical director of cardiothoracic surgery at Rockford Health Systems in Rockford, IL, Dr. Hilton M. Hudson, II knows first hand that there is a tremendous need for timely, accurate health information in the African American community. To help fill this information void, and to help eliminate racial and ethnic disparities in health status and in access to health care, Dr. Hudson launched Hilton Publishing Company in 1997, with the hopes of bringing reliable information not only to African Americans, but to other underserved communities as well.

The underlying goal of each publication is to empower individuals to make healthy lifestyle choices for themselves and their families. Along with the revised 2nd edition of *The Black Man's Guide to Good Health*, Hilton Publishing currently has available books on heart disease and management of cancer.

CTG: Why a book specifically for African American men on health?

Dr. Hudson: African American men are disproportionately affected by nearly all diseases known to man. Cancer, heart disease, kidney disease, high blood pressure, and the like, plague our community. Yet, despite this horrible fact, African American men are less likely to be informed, and more likely to be ignorant about the necessary treatments and preventative measures that we can take among ourselves to make ourselves more healthy and to live longer healthier lives.

We die sooner than any other men in America. As a matter of fact, there are underdeveloped nations that have statistics similar to the morbidity and mortality rates of African American men in this country. In other words, if you are an African American man, you will have about the same chance of living if you're in an underdeveloped country as you have living in certain cities in the U.S. In my opinion, we have lost our sense of pride and self-love. Without it, we fall victim to diseases. We don't take care of ourselves. This book is meant to help regain that pride and self-respect.

CTG: As you know, there is tremendous diversity within the African American community. Who do you hope to reach with this book (e.g., specific age group, socioeconomic group, etc.)?

Dr. Hudson: This book is developed for anybody who can read and has a sense of pride in himself. I think African American people in general are more health conscious than the majority thinks we are.

I also realize that we are lagging behind White America tremendously—in terms of going to health clubs, taking care of ourselves, and eating right—but we do care about our health. So, the book is primarily directed toward lower to upper middle class people. I think that if you're extremely poor, and you can't even afford the basic necessities, or if you're homeless, then you're not going to read this book. Similarly, I think if you're doing extremely well you may not read it either.

It's my hope, if more African American people read this and other health books, it will become the "in" thing to do. So, even though this book may not appeal to the person down on his luck, out on the street, I feel that it is going to appeal to the great majority of African American men. If you can empower folks to take better care of themselves, then that knowledge will then be passed onto their loved ones—which in turn, will create an entire generation of folks concerned about their health.

CTG: Traditionally, women are the gatekeepers for the family—especially as it pertains to health care. Do you feel the book's title will encourage or discourage women from reading it?

Dr. Hudson: We chose this title because we couldn't think of another way to tell Black men that "you are important." While it is our hope that the book will draw in African American men, we know through our research that African American readers are largely Black women. And out of concern and love for the men in their lives, and their families, we believe the title won't keep them from reading it.

CTG: In your opinion, what keeps men from going to the doctor?

Dr. Hudson: Fear is the number one reason why people don't go to the doctor—especially men. Men are trained and grow up feeling invincible, indestructible, strong, and often emotionless. It's often viewed as a sign of weakness to even submit yourself to a diagnostic exam. For men, it's the perception of not being in control, whereas women don't have that particular problem.

Secondly, a feeling of apathy prevents one from going to the doctor. You're not going to take care of yourself if you don't care about life anymore. Lastly, there's a feeling of invincibility, that you're going to live forever. We've been misinformed. This misinformation leads to fear, and that fear prevents us from going to the doctor.

CTG: So, how do you deal with fear?

Dr. Hudson: You deal with fear by educating people. It's basically a lack of knowledge. We believe that by educating people about what really happens when you go to the doctor and telling them the good news—that you CAN live longer and have a healthier life—even if you do have high blood pressure or diabetes. The common misconception is that if you do have a certain disease, it was going to happen anyway, and that it was only a matter of time before it caught up with you. What we're hoping to do with this and other books is to educate in a way that's sensitive to the needs of our people—lessening the fear.

CTG: How can we get men to the doctor?



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Dr. Hudson: Again, through education. Simply increase the awareness bar and demystify medicine. By dealing with the fear head-on, we create a sense of empowerment and pride, which then leads to a change in behavior. In some ways, the fear is warranted. White Americans did not have to deal with Tuskegee and the whole mistrust of the medical profession.

CTG: Do you feel this book will serve as a springboard to encourage African American men to go the doctor?

Dr. Hudson: I sure hope so, because right now, there are no resources available in America today that specifically talk to African American men about health issues in a culturally sensitive and responsible way. Moreover, there are no books written for the lay Black public on hypertension, despite the fact that it is the number one killer of our people today. These books are written by Black doctors, reviewed and edited by Black experts.

CTG: Research has shown that African Americans—especially African American men—die at an earlier age, and from chronic diseases at a higher rate than most other racial/ethnic groups. What do you think can be done from both a public health perspective and on the community level to reduce this disparity?

Dr. Hudson: Education is the key to eliminating the health disparity. If you educate people on what should and should not happen, then you empower them. You are more likely to get what you ask for, and what you need, if you are prepared with a baseline knowledge level. I hate to admit it, but as a physician, the people you treat best in the hospital are often those that you know you have to be accountable to—those that have done their homework. It's not about providing a bunch of free clinics. It's about holding people accountable. This isn't the whole answer...but from a guy who practices medicine every day and who goes around the country listening and speaking with people, it's the easiest way to be effective.

CTG: In your opinion, what do you feel are the cultural beliefs or attitudes towards the prevention and treatment of disease that affect the overall health status of African American men?

Dr. Hudson: We've bought into all the misconceptions about disease and about what's going to happen to us if we get sick and have to see a doctor or go to the hospital. Distrust and mistrust of the medical field have paralyzed us. Although warranted—it's a result of what's happened to us—but we can't continue to allow this to be an excuse.

CTG: What's next for Hilton Publishing?



Dr. Hudson: Our next book titled, 8 Weeks to Better Health—Weight Loss for African American Women, is

coming out this Fall. Written by Dr. Edmond Smith, it's not a diet book. It's about loving oneself, how to get in physical shape, how to eat better and how to take better control of one's health. We're putting this book through the test. We've had three major medical editors review this book, and we will be focus group testing it with consumers to see if we really are being as effective as we think we are.

We are also doing a book on sickle cell anemia. Although there is a lot out there, this is a subject that we thought warranted revisiting. I will be writing another book similar to the one I wrote titled *The Heart of the Matter* on hypertension for African Americans. Along with my colleagues, Dr. James Reed, President of the International Society for Hypertension in Blacks and author of *The Black Man's Guide to Good Health*, Dr. Wayne Kong from the Association of Black Cardiologists, and others, we plan to cover this topic at length. Next year, we will be publishing a book on AIDS, written by Dr. Eric Goosby, former director of the White House Office of National AIDS Policy. This book will be for all minorities—not just African Americans—and will include information particularly relevant to Asians, Hispanics, and others because we know, the virus doesn't distinguish by race.

We're developing a book on cultural competency for doctors and other front line health care professionals to try and teach them how to deal with cultural differences. This book is designed to not only teach what the cultural differences are, but how to apply them, how to make them real, and how to make them work in your practice. For example, how do you counsel a Latino who is also diabetic on his diet, when his diet is completely different? How do you tell a 70-year old hypertensive patient who has heart disease, and is used to eating fried plantains and refried beans, how to eat differently? Most books are based on the non-Asian, non-Latino, non-African American diet. There is a critical need for this information.

CTG: What's the most important message you want African American men (and women) who read this article to remember? What is their call to action?

Dr. Hudson: Have some pride in oneself. Enough to believe in oneself, take care of oneself and to have confidence in oneself. That's what we're missing the most. I want people to pick up this book, not only because it's going to help you live healthier, but for what takes you to that road of picking it up—pride. Lack of awareness and missing pride are killing us. So, what I want people to feel is empowerment, knowledge and a sense of pride. I'm convinced, they're going to get more than just health information.

For more information on other Hilton Publishing Company publications, write to: P.O. Box 737, Roscoe, IL 61073, call 815-885-1070 or go to: <http://www.hiltonpub.com> ♦

