

Working Together to Better Understand Cancer-Related Health Disparities

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Closing the Gap, Cancer • August 2000

Cancer. More and more Americans are surviving it than ever before, thanks to scientific advances in cancer research and technology. Yet despite these gains, cancer mortality and morbidity rates have in some cases increased for minorities, while declining or remaining stable for Whites. These inequities in cancer statistics beg the question: do all Americans have access to and benefit from these progressions in our understanding of cancer?

Historically, minorities have been underrepresented in all phases of the biomedical research process. Systems for data collection and reporting with respect to minorities are uneven and sometimes outdated. Moreover, minorities have traditionally been overlooked both in planning and implementing biomedical and health related research, including epidemiological, behavioral, and community-based research and clinical trials. Nor have minorities been included in adequate numbers to provide statistically valid estimates of health outcomes and differences, if they exist.

A recent Institute of Medicine (IOM) study, *The Unequal Burden of Cancer*, took a critical look at the National Cancer Institute's (NCI) programs targeting minorities and the medically underserved. The study found areas for improvement, citing that minorities and the poor are underrepresented in NCI-funded research.

NCI responded with a comprehensive strategic plan to eliminate cancer-related health disparities. The recent naming of Dr. Harold Freeman to lead this effort will further propel NCI toward achieving its goal. Dr. Freeman has dedicated much of his career to examining health issues that affect minorities and the poor. By choosing Dr. Freeman to oversee its strategic plan, NCI is showing a strong commitment to eliminating the gaps in cancer incidence and mortality.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) National Program of Cancer Registries (NPCR), is a fundamental component of the CDC's vision for a dynamic state-based cancer control strategy. The CDC supports registries in 45 states, the District of Columbia, and three U.S. territories, representing 96 percent of the U.S. population. NCI's Surveillance, Epidemiology and End Results (SEER) program collects cancer incidence data in the remaining five states. Cancer surveillance serves as the foundation

for a national, comprehensive strategy to reduce illness and death from cancer.

Such surveillance is an indispensable tool that enables public health professionals at national, state, and local levels to better understand and address the cancer burden while advancing clinical, epidemiologic, and health services research. We must continue to support these efforts because, without sufficient data on minorities, we will not be able to fully determine the health needs and trends reflective of our communities. The American Cancer Society (ACS) has recently awarded grants totaling nearly \$5 million toward studies that specifically address cancer among poor and underserved populations. The funding is in addition to the millions ACS already spends on research affecting these populations.

The Intercultural Cancer Council (ICC) is an organization that has been in the forefront of the fight against cancer in minority and underserved populations. It was the ICC's efforts that helped lead the charge for the IOM study. In addition, the ICC has been involved with the *Healthy People 2010* work group on cancer, further investing its efforts in the fight against cancer in minorities and the underserved.

The ICC reflects a true success story. The ICC has proven to us all that people can come together from all different walks of life and can speak with one voice against the disproportionate impact of cancer in minority and medically underserved communities.

We must all continue to pull together in our commitment to fight cancer. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has been taking a stronger, more visible approach to reducing and eventually eliminating health disparities in six areas of health, including cancer screening and management, through the Initiative to Eliminate Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Health.

As part of the initiative, the Office of Minority Health is responsible for maintaining the Race and Health Web Site, the Department's official Web site for the initiative. Please browse the site to learn more about our effort to eliminate health disparities in cancer and other illnesses that burden our communities.

For more information on cancer, visit the Race and Health Web Site: <http://www.raceandhealth.omhrc.gov>, and click on cancer screening and management. ❖

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