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Journal examines cancer disparities

By LINDA H. LAMB
llamb@thestate.com

For S.C. doctors who haven't given much thought to how cancer strikes differently in black patients, the subject will be unavoidable when they get the latest issue of The Journal of the South Carolina Medical Association.

Dozens of cancer researchers, physicians and advocates collaborated on a special issue focusing on the fact that African-Americans in this state have some of the highest risks of developing and dying from cancer.

The authors hope to raise awareness of racial disparities and strengthen a growing, statewide effort to help black South Carolinians who are suffering and dying needlessly from cancer every year.

"This is a situation worse than anywhere in the United States," said James Hebert, a contributor to the journal and a researcher with USC's Arnold School of Public Health.

For example, the journal notes, while black men nationally are 55 percent more likely to develop prostate cancer than white men, the difference is close to 80 percent in South Carolina.

Hebert said the articles by 47 contributors should help educate doctors, patients and community leaders about the scope and seriousness of cancer disparities. The peer-reviewed studies address cause-and-prevention issues for breast, cervical, colon, esophagus, lung, oral and prostate cancers.

"We really need to use this as a starting point to start making a difference," Hebert said.

For example, researchers said they are urging the Legislature to mandate insurance coverage for colonoscopy, in which colon polyps can be removed before they become cancerous.

If you don't have insurance, a colonoscopy can cost as much as \$2,000. That points out a controversial question in racial disparities: Do they exist mainly because blacks have lower incomes, less insurance and less access to care?

"That could explain a significant part of it," said Dr. Gerald Wilson, an African-American surgeon in Columbia and past president of the medical society.

But disparities are complicated, he said, agreeing with the thrust of the journal. In some cases, behavior or genetic differences might play a role. And Wilson said some doctors might not regard black patients' health concerns the same way as those of white patients.

Wilson said the journal articles could encourage doctors to get more patients involved in medical studies.

"We're trying to do this as much as possible, because that's the only way we're going to arrive at solutions," he said.

Collaborators on the journal issue include the Statewide Cancer Prevention and Control Program at USC, the S.C. Cancer Disparities Community Network, the S.C. Central Cancer Registry and the S.C. Cancer Alliance.

Reach Lamb at (803) 771-8454.

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