Chicago black women twice as likely to die of breast cancer

ALARMING STUDY | In Chicago, the death rate for black women -- which was already terrible -- gets worse

October 22, 2008
BY MONIFA THOMAS Health Reporter mjthomas@suntimes.com

Black women in Chicago are more than twice as likely to die of breast cancer as white women, according to a new report that finds the racial gap is widening at an alarming rate.

The breast-cancer death rate for black women in Chicago was 116 percent higher than that of white women in 2005, the Metropolitan Chicago Breast Cancer Task Force said Tuesday, even as white women were diagnosed with the disease more often.

That's a sharp rise from the 68 percent difference in mortality rates the task force reported last year.

Chicago's glaring racial gap in breast-cancer mortality is considerably worse than the national average (45 percent) and that of big cities including New York (21 percent), according to Steven Whitman, director of the Sinai Urban Health Institute and a task force member.

That black women in Chicago die of breast cancer so much more often is "unconscionable," Whitman said. "But the really shocking thing is that the black death rate has not gone down at all in the last 25 years. There's virtually no other health condition in which there's just no improvement at all."

Hispanic women weren't part of the latest study. Whitman said their death rates are probably on par with African Americans.

Task force member Dr. Elizabeth Marcus, who runs the breast oncology division at Stroger Hospital, blamed the trend on a "fundamentally broken health-care system" in which minorities -- even those with insurance -- have less access to facilities that provide high-quality mammograms and breast-cancer treatment.

Lower awareness of breast-cancer risk among minorities and distrust of the health system also play a role, Whitman said.

Multiple efforts are under way to close the gap. But task force members said it will take time to see results.

Among the efforts, a bill that recently passed the Illinois Senate would eliminate co-payments for mammography screening and increase reimbursements for centers that provide screening in underserved communities.

And Gov. Blagojevich expanded the Illinois Breast and Cervical Cancer Screening Program last year to allow all uninsured women to get free mammograms and breast exams.
Angela Walker, 36, a Chicago breast-cancer survivor whose mother died of the disease, said it's going to take greater awareness and comprehensive reform of the health system to reverse the "mind-boggling" trend.

Also, Walker said, black women need to see that breast cancer isn't necessarily a death sentence.

"There's survivorship," she said. "And there's plenty of us out there."

---

Prostate Cancer Awareness Month
From Battling Cancer

Congressional Task Force Leaders call for
Alzheimer's Disease Awareness
From Alzheimer's Reading Room

The views expressed in these blog posts are those of the author and not of the Chicago Sun-Times.

---

glong wrote:

What also plays a role, but what left out of the article is the general disdain with which black female patients are treated. As a black female, I don't know how many times I've "fired" doctors/practitioners because of their attitudes: that they feel they have the right to treat me with less courtesy and respect than their "other" patients. That they have the right to not listen to any comments or questions I may bring to the appointment. That they don't have to suggest, much less approve (i.e., HMOs) the necessary follow-up/specialty referrals. That they have the right to tell me to "shut up - you people are so annoying" when I demand the level of care that is provided to their "other" patients. The thing is I'm healthy because I know that I have to fight/demand to be so - it's not something that I can expect my "doctor" to have a vested interest in. It's unfortunate that it is this way, but that's the reality. The thing is, women are taught to be polite to "authority" figures - for black women, that is our death sentence.

10/22/2008 1:07 PM CDT on suntimes.com

Recommend (1) Report Abuse