

Prostate Cancer 101: Problems and Resolutions

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If this were a breast cancer program, there would be standing room only. The advocacy is not the same, and that is a major issue that has to be addressed when we talk about men's health and prostate cancer health.

African American men have a 60% higher prostate cancer incidence rate, and they are also at a more than 240% higher risk for mortality compared to their White counterparts. It is clear that racial disparities exist, but we can't neglect to recognize that the life expectancy for all men in the United States is substantially lower compared to women. Something has to be done to address the discrepancies, and we should think about the role that prostate cancer plays.

Prostate cancer screening has been promoted as the best way to detect prostate cancer, and a typical prostate cancer screen consists of a digital rectal exam coupled with a blood test. The blood test is to measure the prostate specific antigen (PSA), but PSA is a protein made by cells inside the prostate. A healthy prostate may not release much PSA so a higher level of PSA may be a warning; however, a PSA level can be elevated for other reasons such as an infection or a non-cancerous growth. In addition, a low level of PSA does not always mean that there is no prostate cancer. Many early-stage prostate cancers grow with low levels of PSA. Is the PSA specific enough? It is not specific to prostate cancer, but it has saved lives. The question is who should it be used for, and how should we decide what individuals should be screened using this methodology? Today a high PSA level is the number one way that prostate cancer is detected in the United States.

We clearly need better methods and approaches to identify the prostate cancers that warrant treatment as opposed to treating all men, including those men with cancer, that will never progress to advanced-stage disease. There is a need for more reliable biomarkers and assays for the identification and treatment of prostate cancer. More funding is necessary to address prostate health adequately and more effectively.