

Keynote Luncheon

Jean Bonhomme, MD

Oncologist

The key factors which lead African-American males to not participate in the health care system include a lack of knowledge about health issues, distrust of the health care system, stoic unresponsiveness to pain and illness, and limited access to health care. Lack of attention to this lack of African-American men's health concerns can have a substantial negative economic effect on families and communities. As a public health physician, I look at men's health from a population level as well as from a health education level.

When men become disabled, usually the women in their lives become caretakers. A wife of a disabled man may face diminished family earnings, trouble maintaining the home, and an increased risk of dying herself. For society as a whole, preventable male illness and death causes lost time from work, diminished work productivity, a former provider can become a dependent, a former taxpayer may become a burden on the tax system, some people are unable to maintain gainful employment due to chronic illness short of disability. There is a strong association between poverty and widowhood, and children can also face financial repercussions of preventable male illness and death.

When comparing public attention towards breast cancer and prostate cancer, some people may view the health of the genders as though they were opposite ends of a seesaw: if you do something for men's health care, it will take away from women and children. Thus, the health of adult males has been dismissed as irrelevant to the well-being of the family. But genders have so much interaction on many levels, that the health of any community or nation depends on a positive balance between the genders.

African-American men have poor rates of participation in preventative health care. Men as a group are less likely to use the health care system than women. African-American men are less likely to carry health insurance, less likely to have seen a physician in the previous year, and more likely to delay seeking health care, and among minority men, health care utilization rates are especially poor. The fact that these men are less likely to have seen a doctor in the previous year is not just a monetary problem. More Black men than Black women do not have health insurance, and for Latinos, this comparable situation is more obvious.

One in six American men overall will be diagnosed with prostate cancer; the rate of diagnosis is approximately 50% higher for African-American men and the death rate is about twice as high. Risk factors may include diet high in animal fat, family history among African-Americans, and lower vitamin D levels in African-American men.

Looking at mental illness and depression, men are socialized to be stoic, banishing thoughts about problems from their consciousness and dissociating themselves from emotions. For men, acting out may take the form of chronic anger, self destructiveness, drug use, gambling, womanizing, and workaholism. Certain jobs which men engage in,

including military service, subject them to greater and different health risks than those not employed in such lines of work.

Men's health has a major impact on women, children, and the whole of society. It has never been an issue solely for men. Men in general are taught early in life to be tough, take it like a man, take one for the team, and ignore physical pain. Awareness programs in men's health can be effective when scheduled and designed appropriately.

It is not a lack of intelligence which causes men not to take care of themselves; they simply have not been taught to do it in their own bodies. This speaker tells men to take care of themselves the way they would take care of their car. Screenings can move into the workplace for easier access.

In sum, increased attention to the health of African-American men holds the potential to bolster the overall health status of both genders. Gender health is not an either/or issue; it is a both/neither issue. If we do not optimize both, we will not optimize either. We need to consider children's health, women's health, men's health, and minority health as coequal partners as a four-pronged approach to building a complete and inclusive health care system and achieving optimal overall health in our communities and in the nation as a whole.