

Black physicians combat health care disparities

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Washington, D.C. – Members of the National Medical Association (NMA), the nation's largest organization of African-American physicians, have developed and refined an aggressive action plan to help reduce the health disparities that plague the African-American community and result in an unnecessary loss of life and an annual cost to the U.S. economy of billions of dollars.

On April 17, at the second Summit on African Health in Washington, D.C., the NMA developed the plan with a number of other key organizations. These groups included the National Black Nurses Association, Aetna Insurance, AstraZeneca Pharmaceuticals, United Black Fund, National Society of Allied Health and the increasingly popular BlackDoctors.org.

The ultimate goal of the plan is to reach and educate as many African-Americans as possible about such preventive healthcare measures as maintaining proper diets and nutritional habits, developing appropriate exercise regimes and undergoing regular screenings to help mitigate health disparities. According to NMA president, Dr. Michael LeNoir, "The Affordable Care Act is not a perfect act. Just because over seven million people sign up for insurance coverage does not automatically guarantee the elimination of the major healthcare disparities that currently exist in this nation, and especially those that exist in the African American community."

Specifically, the NMA and the other organizations at the summit agreed to begin aggressively involving community based healthcare advocates, churches, businesses, school systems and other organizations in regularly communicating information to the public on how to improve an individual's health.

"Access and action go hand in hand," said the Summit's program director, Dr. Sharon D. Allison-Ottoy. "Access to healthcare services and the proactive action to maintain good health, when that access is available, are directly tied to the elimination of healthcare disparities in the African-American community."

"Cancer is common in the African American community, so we have to do more to continuously educate African Americans about all aspects of this disease, particularly breast and prostate cancer. Screenings need to be provided wherever and whenever possible," added LeNoir. "African-American women with breast cancer, for example, are 40 percent more likely to die from breast cancer than white women. Prostate cancer, on the other hand, is the most common

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cancer among American men of all ethnic groups. But the incidence of African-American males suffering from prostate cancer is 66 percent higher than white males and the mortality rate of African-American males with the dreaded cancer is twice as high as white men."

Johns Hopkins Center for Health Disparities Program on Men's Health recently released a study on health disparities among men in the United States and estimated that, between 2006 and 2009, these disparities cost the nation \$450 billion.

African-American men were responsible for the majority of the costs, with \$341 billion spent on medical costs. The figure represents the total amount spent on medical expenses accumulated over the four-year evaluation period and the costs associated with lower worker productivity due to the loss of work and premature death.

In addition to educating the community and providing more screenings, the NMA and the other summit attendees plan to target Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and mainstream institutions of higher learning to encourage more African-American students, particularly males, to pursue healthcare careers. Today, the majority of African-American medical students, almost 70 percent, are females. Representatives from BlackDoctor.org, the National Black Nurses Association, and the NMA will also begin identifying foundations and other sources to secure funding that will be used to launch collaborative initiatives that address the growing health disparities in the African-American community.

Former NMA president, Dr. Rahn K. Bailey, believes the messages to the community on healthcare are fragmented and that organizations must find a way to effectively coordinate and work together to promote the important messages about healthcare.

"Black doctors are no longer the only vehicle to communicate health and medical information to African-American people," said Bailey. "We now have the NAACP, National Urban League, 100 Black Men, 100 Black Women, fraternities, sororities, and other Black groups to help deliver the messages on health."

Summit participants agreed that when it comes to health disparities in the African-American community that doctors do not have all of the answers. Many at the summit envision a consortium of government agencies, private institutions, public institutions, civic groups and other organizations that will be formed to help decrease the health disparities that plague African-Americans.