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# SICKLE CELL UPDATE

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BY DICK CAMPBELL\*



Sickled Cells

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**t**he late Billie Holiday once sang a song entitled "Mama may have and Papa may have, but God bless the child who has his own." It was impossible for anyone to mistake what she meant when she sang that song. The implication could very well apply to the blood disorder which predominantly affects Blacks and Hispanics, called Sickle Cell Anemia.

This condition precipitates a serious illness or "crisis," accompanied by excruciating pain that affects every part of the body and may cause the sufferer to be hospitalized from one to two weeks or more, depending on the severity of the crisis. There is no fully acceptable treatment for the disease at this time, although transfusions, urea and cyanate have been tried with unpredictable success or failure.

With the budget-cutting measures riding high in Washington, the chances of monies being allocated for the blood disorder which affects America's largest minority are few and far between. Now, the implications of the Billie Holiday song "Mama may have and Papa may have, but God bless the child who has his own," is more understandable. What we are saying here, is that Blacks and Hispanics will have to pick up the pieces and carry on themselves. It's fine if the Federal government underwrites sickle cell anemia programs of research, education, prevention and all the rest, but in the final analysis, we'd better take care of our own.

How does sickle cell anemia and sickle cell trait affect Black people? It's an hereditary blood disorder. If two people with sickle cell trait have

an offspring the chances are one out of four, or 25%, that the offspring could have sickle cell anemia, one out of four or 25% that it could be born absolutely normal, or two out of four, or 50% that the offspring could have sickle cell trait. Those are the statistics based on Mendel's Theory of Heredity, and we can pretty well say that old Mendel was hardly ever wrong in his prognostications. In Greater New York City more than 168,000 blacks carry the Sickle Cell Trait and over 1600 are affected by the debilitating Sickle Cell Anemia. The disease causes the red blood cells to assume an elongated, crescent or Sickle shape, and as blood flows through the veins or capillaries, the abnormal cells tend to clump or cause a "log-jam" which inhibits the flow of oxygen throughout the body.

#### Sickle Cell: Last by Comparison

Other Foundations for blood diseases and birth defects such as March of Dimes, Cystic Fibrosis, Muscular Dystrophy, Arthritis, Lung Diseases, Heart Diseases and etc., are able to make liberal grants for services, education, research and clinical therapy because their budgets vary from one to nearly 100 million dollars annually.

If this is true among the major foundations for blood diseases among people of other persuasion, it can be safely said, that there is no sickle cell organization in America that can point to a budget of more than half a million dollars in its treasury at this time, or any time in the past. What a travesty on this human health problem in America! Think about it! The largest minority in the U.S.A. has a greater incidence of its "ethnic" disease than any other ethnic group in this country, and receives less than all the others, in terms of support.

Let us take a run down on some of the large foundations for various dis-

eases and see what their budgets were in 1977, let alone the major increases which have occurred up to and including 1982. The American Cancer Society, for instance, had a budget of 126 million dollars, American Heart Association over 77 million dollars, the National Foundation March of Dimes over 60 million, Muscular Dystrophy over 59 million, American Lung Association over 57 million, United Cerebral Palsy over 50 million and so on. But you name one sickle cell organization locally, nationally or otherwise, with a budget of more than half a million dollars and this writer will eat crow forever and ever thereafter.

#### Slow Progress But Encouraging

But even with this element of slow progress, we can still say that sickle cell anemia has come a long way. Ten years ago, the average person knew little or nothing about the disease. Dr. Robert Scott in Richmond, Virginia, conducted a poll in 1967 and found that only 3 out of 10 blacks whom he questioned had ever heard of the disease. It is not quite that bad at this time. The Sickle Cell Disease Foundation of Greater New York conducted a similar poll on 125th Street in Harlem last year and results were vastly improved, but not what they should have been. For instance, of more than one thousand interviewed on the corner of 125th Street and Seventh Avenue in Harlem, nearly 50% knew nothing at all about sickle cell anemia, other than that they had heard about it. Nearly 80% thought that it was a disease of Black people only; about 85% thought you could "catch it" from someone else, and approximately 90% thought it was like "cancer." None of these answers were correct but at least an improvement in the education of the general Black public was evident.