

High Stroke Risks Due To Racial Differences

By Robert Conn
Bowman Gray School of Medicine

Deaths from strokes are substantially more common among black men and black women than among white men or white women.

"Part of the difference in stroke deaths occurs because of higher prevalence of stroke risk factors among U.S. blacks than whites: more high blood pressure, more diabetes, a greater percentage of smokers, more obesity," said Dr. Gregory L. Burke, associate professor and vice chairman of the Department of Public Health Sciences.

Burke has been studying racial differences in stroke and related diseases for more than 10 years. Based on his work, Burke believes the difference in mortality between blacks and whites is not due primarily to genetic differences.

"Skin color alone does not cause a person to be at greater risk of disease, with the exception of some specific genetic diseases, such as sickle cell anemia," Burke said. "We believe that the differences seen between African Americans and whites are related to differences in known risk factors and economic factors, which are preventable.

"If appropriate dietary and behavioral recommendations were followed, known risk factors were treated, and medical care was the same among blacks and whites," he said, "we would expect virtually no difference in mortality."

He cited a study done in Charleston, S.C., comparing a group of black professionals and businessmen with a randomly

selected group of blacks and whites from the general population. The black professionals and businessmen had the best heart disease risk profile and the lowest rates of subsequent heart disease.

Bowman Gray faculty members are pursuing possible reasons for differences in mortality through three major studies:

- ARIC (Atherosclerosis Risk in Communities), is a study of 16,000 middle-aged persons in four U.S. communities, with 4,000 participants in Forsyth County. ARIC is designed to better understand how risk factors relate to development of heart disease and strokes. About 5,000 of the 16,000 participants are black. Burke said investigators hope to better answer why racial differences in disease exist, and what steps could be taken to reduce those differences.

- CHS (Cardiovascular Health Study), is investigating factors associated with heart disease risk in older adults.

- RECORDS (Southeastern Consortium on Racial Differences in Stroke) aims at understanding why more blacks die of stroke than whites. The questions being explored include: are there differences in hospital treatment? Differences in rehabilitation? Are the strokes more severe?

Burke said investigators already know the percentage of hemorrhagic — bleeding — strokes is higher in blacks, while whites tend to have more strokes caused by blood clots or other debris lodging in the arteries of the brain. These differences may contribute to mortality differences, since hemorrhagic strokes tend to be fatal more often.

Studies Show Prostate Cancer Is On The Rise

By Karen Richardson
Bowman Gray School of Medicine

If you're a black man in North Carolina, your chances of developing prostate cancer are 25 percent higher than for white men. The disease, which kills 35,000 men each year, is the most common cancer among men.

At the Bowman Gray School of Medicine, researchers are looking for what causes the disease and also developing a program to encourage black men to get regular prostate examinations.

A digital rectal exam, often combined with a blood test, is the most current way to diagnose the disease early, when the chance of cure is higher.

Studies at the Comprehensive Cancer Center of Wake Forest University, however, revealed that black men are less likely than white men to have attended a free screening before and less likely to have had a digital rectal exam in the previous year.

The researchers asked black men who attended free community prostate screenings

about their attitudes, beliefs and knowledge about prostate screening. In a study funded by the J. Paul Sticht Center on Aging, they also questioned patients at Wake Forest University Physicians and Reynolds Health Center.

This information will be used to design a program to educate black men about the importance of screening.

In another study, researchers want to find out if a chromosomal abnormality is linked to prostate cancer. This information could be used to identify men likely to develop the disease so they could receive regular screenings.

"If we can identify high-risk groups, they could be screened more often," said Electra Paskett, assistant professor of public health sciences at Bowman Gray School of Medicine.

Doctors already know, for example, that black males, men over 65 and men with a family history of prostate cancer run a higher risk of developing the disease than other men.

"If we can find out what causes prostate cancer, we can encourage a change in behavior to prevent it," Paskett said.

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