

# HEALTH & WELLNESS

ISSUES CONCERNING THE WELL-BEING OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

## Be positive

### Poor attitude linked with heart problems

BY TODD SPANGLER  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

**PITTSBURGH** — Having a positive outlook may help stem the risk of recurring coronary problems, according to a study released today.

The study, which appears in the current issue of Psychosomatic Medicine, looked at nearly 300 patients who had undergone an angioplasty — a procedure in which a balloon-like device is used to relieve arterial blockage.

Patients with lower measures of self-esteem, optimism and feelings of control over their lives were more likely to experience a second blockage within six months than those with better attitudes, according to the study.

"Our study certainly suggests that health care professionals can try to identify people who are at risk for subsequent events and perhaps monitor their behavior," said Vicki Helgeson, a psychology professor at Carnegie Mellon University who directed the study.

Researchers questioned 292 angioplasty patients to measure their feelings of self-esteem, optimism and control. Patients were then divided into three groups based on their scores.

Follow-up visits showed that in 20 percent of the patients, arteries began to close again within six months, a condition known as "restenosis."

According to the study, of the third that scored the highest on the attitude tests, less than 10 percent reported a second coronary problem. Correspondingly, of those who scored the lowest on the tests, more than 29 percent reported experiencing restenosis.

Helgeson said she looked for other indicators, such as age, education, occupation and race, but could find no correlation as strong as the one seen with the attitudinal measurements.

The study has its limitations, however. The researchers could only collect data on the patients who reported restenosis. Others could have experienced it and not known it or kept the information from their doctors.

Martha Hill, a professor at the Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing and past president of the American Heart Association, said the study is another example of why medical research must take social factors and behavior — as well as physiological indicators — into account.

Past studies have shown that people with depression may suffer more heart problems. This, she said, appears to show the inverse is also true.

"One reason we have a big problem now ... is that our studies have been too narrow," Hill said. "This is another piece of information that tells us the psychological variables are important."



File photo  
Having a positive attitude may help reduce the risk of recurring coronary problems.

## Private scientist faults V.A. over radium study

BY MELISSA B. ROBINSON  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

**WASHINGTON** — A public health scientist who has spent years investigating nasal radium treatments on veterans and children is criticizing the Department of Veterans Affairs' recent study on submariners.

Stewart Farber, of Warren, Vt., said the VA diluted its results by including 770 men in its treated group who may never have had nasal radium at all.

"The treated group invalidates the entire study," said Farber, who started the nonprofit Radium Experiment Assessment Project to promote greater public awareness of nasal radium's potential health risks.

The VA study, released last week by Sen. Joseph Lieberman, D-Conn., found that Navy submariners may be at higher risk for cancer if they got nasal radium in the 1940s, '50s and '60s.

Nasal radium was given to thousands of military submariners, divers and pilots who were troubled by drastic changes in atmospheric pressure. Many submariners were treated while training in Groton, Conn.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated that as many as 2 million civilians were also treated, mostly as children for colds, tonsillitis, ear infections and sinus or adenoid problems.

Typically, applicators containing 50 milligrams of radium were inserted into the nostrils to shrink tissues at the entrance of the eustachian tubes, which help drain and balance pressure on the inner and outer ear.

A typical military regimen consisted of three to four treatments, each lasting up to 12 minutes, a few weeks apart.

Eventually, radium treatments were abandoned as antibiotics were developed, the military went to pressurized aircraft cabins and questions were increasingly raised about radiation's health effects.

In recent years, former radium patients have come forward to complain of tumors, thyroid and immune disorders, brittle teeth and reproductive problems.

The VA study compared deaths among 1,214 submariners who had the treatment vs. deaths in a control group of 3,176 randomly selected veterans who were not treated. It found a 47 percent increased risk of deaths from head and neck cancers in submariners who were treated, as well as a higher, overall death rate.

But Farber said the treated group should have been much smaller, because only 431 of the 1,214 men — who were identified from a log book kept at the Groton naval base — actually had an "R" notation by their names, indicating radium was administered.

Another 13 were found to have radium from other records. That amounts to a total group of 444 men who definitely had the treatment, said Farber. Comparing those to thousands of untreated men would have yielded stronger conclusions of radium's potential harm, he said.

The VA acknowledges the difficulty of determining just who was treated with radium, given the sloppiness of records.

"Looking at what the best population is to study is very problematic," said Terry Jemison, a department spokesman.

In the study, the department says it would have been too easy to miscalculate the treated group by using only the "R" notation. It used all 1,214 men because logbook researchers believed those men were the same ones described in a 1946 research study on nasal radium's effectiveness by Dr. Henry Haines, who administered treatments at the base.

Farber said all those men couldn't possibly have had radium because Haines didn't begin using radium until 1945, while the logbook men enlisted as early as 1944.

## Low birth weight affects black babies more

BY DAVID HO  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

**WASHINGTON** — Black babies die from problems related to low birth weight four times as often as white babies, the government says.

"We know that black mothers are much more likely to have a low birth-weight baby than white mothers and that's primarily what's driving this," said Dr. Marian MacDorman, author of the report released Thursday by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

If the proportion of underweight births among black mothers could be reduced to the level of white mothers, it would cut the overall black infant death rate by 16 percent, she said.

In 1997, the latest data available, about 13 percent of black babies and 6.5 percent of white babies weighed under 5.5 pounds at birth, the CDC reported.

The figures show that overall

infant mortality continued to decline, but black infants still died at more than twice the rate of white babies.

Black mothers fell into high-risk categories more often than their white counterparts. They were twice as likely to be teenagers and nearly three times as likely to be unmarried, MacDorman said. Black mothers also got slightly less prenatal care.

Dr. Henry Spring, acting deputy commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Health, said the death rate disparity between black and white infants has existed for as long as such records have been kept — nearly 100 years.

"There is no clear answer" for why this happens, he said, but the problem goes beyond "the common myths of teen pregnancy, drugs, and poverty."

"When you compare women of equal position, the only difference being black or white," the higher death rate for black infants still exists, he said.

Yvonne Wesley, director of the Black Infant Mortality Reduction and Resource Center, said black mothers are more likely to deliver prematurely. Black women suffer more often from an infection called bacterial vaginosis that contributes to premature births, she said, adding that there is also a more controversial suspect: high stress in the lives of black women.

Some researchers have pointed to factors such as living in high-crime areas and discrimination at work or school. Stress raises levels of hormones called corticosteroids that may trigger premature labor, Wesley said.

The CDC report found that for every 1,000 births, nearly 14 black babies died before age 1, compared with six deaths for white or Hispanic infants. For the nation overall, the infant death rate was just over seven deaths per 1,000.

American Indian babies also had a higher mortality rate, with almost nine of every 1,000 dying

Of all the groups surveyed, American Indians had the most deaths from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, a rate two and a half times that of whites.

Asian infants were most likely to survive, with only five deaths for every 1,000 births.

MacDorman said the lower Asian death rate might be caused by "fewer births to traditionally high-risk" mothers, such as teens and smokers.

In 1997, the leading causes of death among infants were birth defects, low birth-weight disorders and SIDS.

## Drug-resistant pneumonia on the rise

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

**ATLANTA** — The bacteria that cause pneumonia, meningitis and other serious illnesses are becoming increasingly resistant to penicillin, federal health officials said.

The number of cases of streptococcus pneumoniae bacterium that proved resistant to antibiotics increased from 14 percent in 1993-94 to 25 percent in 1997, the Centers for Disease Control and Pre-

vention said Thursday.

Although the study did not address the reason for the increase, Dr. Daniel Feikin of the CDC said one of the leading factors is overuse.

"A lot of infections are viral, and antibiotics don't do anything for viral infections," he said. "So when people go in with a viral infection like a cold they come out

with an antibiotic when they shouldn't."

The data came from a CDC study of hospitals in seven states. The prevalence of drug-resistant pneumonia varied from 15.3 percent in Maryland to 38.3 percent in Tennessee. Other states included in the study were California, Oregon, Connecticut, Minnesota and Georgia.

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