

Herald News: The race factor in breast cancer

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HERALD NEWS

BREAST cancer awareness has come a long way in recent years, but among African-American women, it still has a ways to go. This is particularly troubling because over the years a comparison of mortality rates has shown that black women of all ages die more frequently of breast cancer than white women, even though they are much less likely to be diagnosed with the disease.

The answer to that disturbing reality and others related to the disease may only be discovered in time, through more, and more thorough, scientific research. Thankfully, just such an ambitious research project is under way in New Jersey and in other parts of the country. It is called the Women's Circle of Health study. Chief among its aims is to better understand why breast cancer affects women of different races differently, Staff Writer Lindy Washburn reported.

So far more than 2,400 New Jersey women, including more than 200 each from Bergen and [Passaic](#) counties, have joined the study. And yet more participants are needed. African-American women who live in Bergen, Hudson, Essex, Passaic, Union, Mercer, Monmouth and Burlington counties are invited to join. When joined with three other studies nationally, more than 10,000 women will have participated in the study, which has been provided an infusion of \$19.6 million in funding over the summer by the National Cancer Institute.

"Breast cancer in African-American women occurs at an earlier age than in European-American women," according to the first paper from the Women's Circle of Health study, which was co-authored by Dr. Elisa V. Bandera of the Cancer Institute of New Jersey and Karen Pawlish of the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services, along with 28 others.

Black women are more likely to have high-grade tumors and tumors that don't respond to hormonal therapy, the study has found, though the reasons remain unknown. This is why it is so vitally important for more women to step forward to be included in the study. About 1,000 more black women in New Jersey are needed as participants over the next four years, Bandera said.

Candidates must either have had a breast-cancer diagnosis within the previous nine months or, if without cancer, meet certain other criteria. No medications or blood work are involved. Instead, participants answer a host of lifestyle questions, are asked to provide saliva samples and are asked to allow researchers to measure their body-mass index. Half of those involved in the study have been diagnosed with cancer and half of them are part of a "healthy" control group.

Though there is still much more to know about breast cancer, particularly about how it attacks African-American women, we know enough already to realize the need for more study is great, both for those women already diagnosed and for others who might be in the future. According to study author Pawlish, her previous research found "that African-American women were 70 percent more likely to die of breast cancer, compared to white women with breast cancer."

Certainly, we encourage all women, young and old, of all racial and ethnic backgrounds to be aware of their risk factors and to recognize the importance of annual screenings after the age of 40. And we encourage those who fit the criteria, and who are willing and able, to participate in this comprehensive study, for their own good and for the good of other women they may never even know.

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