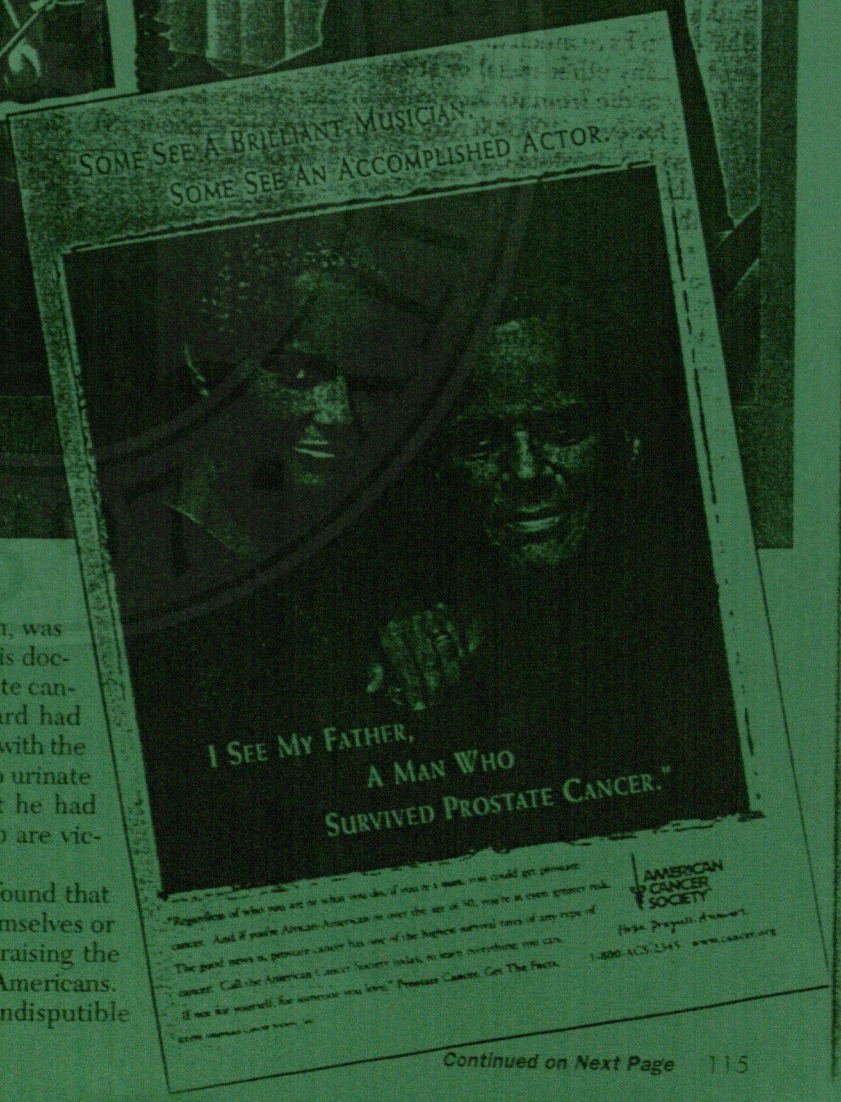
Why Prostate Cancer Is Picking On Black Men

African-Americans have the highest rate in the U.S., possibly in the world



By Walter Leavy

HENRY Jackson, like so many other men, was stunned, scared and speechless when his doctor told him what he had found—prostate cancer. At 53, the New York security guard had none of the classic symptoms associated with the deadly disease—no urgency to urinate, no difficulty to urinate and no pain in his lower back, hips or thighs—but he had become one in a growing number of Black men who are victimized by the disease.

In recent years, more and more Black men have found that either they are having to deal with prostate cancer themselves or they know other Black men who are dealing with it, raising the question of why the disease appears to target African-Americans.

So far, doctors and researchers don't have an indisputable

Continued on Next Page

At Emory University, former South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a prostate cancer survivor, remains active as a visiting professor of theology at the Atlanta university's Candler School of Theology. Investigators in the African-American Hereditary Prostate Cancer Study (below) include (front row, l. to r.) Dr. David McLeod, Washington, D.C.; Dr. Curtis Pettaway, Houston; Dr. Ike Powell, Detroit; (second row) Dr. Srinivasan Vijayakumar, Chicago; Dr. James Bennett, Atlanta; Dr. Gerald Hoke, New York; Dr. Terry Mason, Chicago; (third row) Dr. Francis S. Collins, National Institutes of Health; Dr. William Boykin, Houston; Dr. Georgia Dunston, Washington, D.C.; Dr. Sally Weinrich, Columbia, S.C.; Dr. Ricky Kittles, Washington, D.C.; and Dr. John Carpten, National Institutes of Health.

PROSTATE CANCER *Continued*

answer to that question, but they do know that African-American men have the country's highest prostate cancer rates, and they are 50 percent more likely than White men to develop the disease. More distressing is the fact that Black men have much higher death rates from prostate cancer than any other racial or ethnic group (Blacks are twice as likely to die from it). According to the American Cancer Society, for every 100,000 African-American men, about 181 will develop prostate cancer this year, 54 of whom will die from the disease.

Although doctors continue to investigate, searching for the cause of the disproportionate rates, they do have two strong suspicions about why so many Black men are victims of the disease —diet and heredity. "We believe it [high rates of prostate cancer in Black men] may have its origin in a cultural phenomenon, specifically in the way we eat, but we haven't proved that yet," says Dr. Terry Mason, a Chicago urologist and surgeon who is one of the most-respected physicians in the country. "In the Black community, many of us eat a high-fat, low-fiber diet, and we believe that saturated fat could contribute to this cancer that's killing Black men at such an alarming rate. We are also working to see if heredity has something to do with it."

The frequency in which African-American men are victimized by the disease suggests that inherited factors might play a role. So, in an effort to determine the connection between heredity and prostate cancer, the first large-scale genetic study of African-Americans is being conducted almost entirely by African-American clinical investigators and scientists. The African-American Hereditary Prostate Cancer Study is a collaborative effort between Howard University and the National Institutes of Health, and it's designed to determine if some members of African-American families have inherited alterations in their genetic material that contribute to an increased risk of developing prostate cancer.

Investigators at seven study centers —Washington, D.C., Chicago, New York, Detroit, Atlanta, Houston, Columbia, S.C.—are enrolling families with at least four blood relatives who have the disease, three of whom must be available for blood sampling. The study, which began last year, is scheduled to continue for the next two years, and researchers hope to enroll at least 100 families before completion. "Our knowledge of genetics has had the power to transform our understanding of human disease, allowing us to radically improve treatments, develop cures and save lives," says Dr. Georgia Dunston, a professor in the College of Medicine at Howard University. "We must expand our knowledge to include the genetics of all groups of people so that everyone may benefit from this power."

In the meantime, doctors continue to urge men, especially African-American men, to take control and grasp the power that comes with knowledge about a disease that can be much less disastrous and, in some cases, "cured" if it's detected in its early stages. Unfortunately, many Black men have not taken advantage of lifesaving information about prostate cancer, but the recent publicity surrounding Minister Louis Farrakhan's battle with the disease has brought new

Continued on Page 118

Prostate cancer survivors around the country have formed groups to offer support for other men with the disease. The Minority Men Prostate Cancer Support Group in Kansas City, Mo., includes (front row, l. to r.) Bill Mayfield, Benjamin Broaden and Luther McArn. Those in the back row (l. to r.) are the Rev. Raymond Handy, the Rev. Andrew King, Sr., Herbert Polson, Jonah Wright, Richard White and the Rev. Richard Gray.

PROSTATE CANCER *Continued*

focus to the condition, prompting thousands of men to seek information and get tested themselves for the first time.

The American Cancer Society hopes that its own get-out-the-word campaign and the continuing publicity surrounding Farrakhan (and other prostate cancer survivors like former South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu) will be instrumental in getting men to understand the importance of early detection. That's the message that's coming from entertainer Harry Belafonte and his daughter, actress Shari Belafonte, both of whom have joined the American Cancer Society to promote a nationwide campaign to increase awareness about the disease. "There is no reason men should live in darkness and fear about prostate cancer," says Belafonte, a prostate cancer survivor. "The more facts men and their families know, the more they know the truth. Knowledge is the only way to begin fighting this disease."

The prostate gland, which produces the fluid that carries sperm during ejaculation, is about the size of a walnut and is located behind the base of the penis and under the bladder. Although prostate cancer can occur in men of all ages, it most often strikes those over the age of 65. But contrary to growing suspicion, prostate cancer apparently is not more aggressive in Black men and doesn't attack them any differently than it does members of other ethnic groups when conditions are the same. "We have found that when African-American men take advantage of early-detection measures and are diagnosed at an earlier stage, they tend to survive just as well as White men do," says Dr. Mason, who is a member of the group that's investigating the link between genetics and prostate cancer. "When you look at our community in terms of access to health care and other socioeconomic factors, race may be a surrogate. In other words, if you're Black, you are more likely not to take advantage of screening; more likely to be poor; more likely not to be able to take advantage of the kind of treatment you need; and more likely to eat more of the wrong kind of food. But the preliminary data show that when you get people who are treated the same, take advantage of the same things, and their dietary patterns are the same, they will have similar [prostate cancer] results."

The results hinge on early detection, which is the key to fighting prostate cancer, a disease that has no symptoms in its early stages. By the time a man experiences frequent urination or inability to urinate, trouble starting or holding back urination, weak or interrupted urine flow or pain in the pelvis, spine, hips or ribs, the cancer is likely to have advanced. That's why members of the medical community strongly urge men to get an annual prostate-specific antigen test (PSA) in combination with a digital rectal exam (DRE). Those African-Americans who are in the high-risk group (those who have a father or brother with the disease) are urged to begin annual testing at age 40. Those who are at less risk might delay testing until they are between the ages of 45 and 50, but some doctors say beginning annual testing as early as age 30 isn't too early—especially for Black men.

In prostate cancer, like other forms of cancer, the point at which the disease is detected can be the difference between life and death. "The reason many African-Americans associate a cancer diagnosis with a death sentence is because in the old days many of us didn't get diagnosed until a cancer had reached a very advanced stage," Dr. Mason says. "It doesn't have to be that way. If we as a people took more responsibility for our health and began to eat better, stopped smoking, had regular check-ups and added 20 to 30 minutes of exercise three times a week, then we'd have the formula for healthy success. Just do it! It could save your life."

NOTE: Eligible families who wish to participate in the African-American Hereditary Prostate Cancer Study should call project organizers toll-free at 1-888-218-6157.