

Health worse, medical care less likely for U.S. blacks

By Faye Fiore

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Due in part to racism and a history of exclusion, black Americans at all income levels are in poorer health than whites but are far less likely to see a doctor, according to a series of studies published today.

Despite some progress since the civil rights movement more than 20 years ago, quality health care in black communities is hard to find and blacks still die earlier than whites as a result, a national study co-authored by a UCLA sociologist has found.

The research is one of several studies included in a special issue on the health of black Americans published in the Journal of the American Medical Association in honor of the birthday of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.

The studies conclude that the substandard quality of life in the average black community is costing lives, something leaders of the black community have long known. But publication of the studies in one of the most revered journals in the country suggests the medical establishment has finally recognized a national health crisis.

"If you are black and you are poor, you are indeed in a difficult situation if you want equality with your more affluent neighbors," said Howard E. Freeman, chairman of UCLA's Department of Sociology, who co-authored the study with Harvard University health policy professor Robert Blendon. "It is a major national problem."

Their survey of more than 10,000 people nationwide in 1986 revealed that:

- One in every 11 blacks did not receive health care because they could not afford it, compared to one in 20 whites.

- One-third of blacks with hypertension — a leading killer in that community — did not have an annual blood pressure check, compared to 19 percent of whites.

Los Angeles Herald Examiner

Friday, January 13, 1989

Blacks

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- Fifty percent of blacks had received no dental care in the previous year, compared to 36 percent of whites.

- Blacks are less likely to have health insurance than are whites, including state and federally funded Medicare and Medi-Cal coverage.

- "Even when money isn't an issue, the effects of the stress of trying to live in a racist society have an adverse affect on health," Freeman said.

Blacks are more likely to be poor, living in crime-ridden communities where supermarkets shut down and most doctors will not practice. Nutrition is inadequate. And whatever medical care is available is often unaffordable or miles away, several leading black physicians interviewed said.

- "Supermarkets move out of their neighborhoods, and they fill their stomachs with doughnuts and sweets," said Dr. Lewis King, dean of medicine at the Charles R. Drew University of Medicine and Science in Los Angeles. "That produces more diabetes, more kidney dialysis, more hypertension."

Blacks above the poverty level often hold jobs with limited insurance policies that cover them but not their children, the doctors

said.

And after years of segregation forced blacks to care for the sick at home, they are culturally unaccustomed to going to the doctor, the physicians said.

"You are much less likely to run and get a Pap smear if you are concerned about getting food to eat," said Dr. Edward W. Savage of Los Angeles, one of eight certified black oncologists in the country.

While the black community is served primarily by black doctors, only 3 percent of American physicians are black. They struggle to care for 12 percent of the nation's population, the studies said.

Blacks are still 1½ times more likely to die than whites of the same age, and infant mortality of black babies is twice that of white infants, the journal reports.

Indeed, Los Angeles County has one of the highest black infant mortality rates in the country, and it continues to climb, said Dr. Xylina Bean, head of the neonatal care program at Martin Luther King Jr.—Drew Medical Center in Los Angeles.

The solution lies not only in more medical services, but in educating the black community to take advantage of them.

But Los Angeles County seems to be on a backward course: The county disbanded outreach programs and health education in a wave of budget cuts in recent years, Bean noted.