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TAPE # 02-26-16 COLONOSCOPY PODCAST AUDIO RAW

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INTERVIEWER

Today we're joined by Dr. Stephen B. Thomas, Professor, Health Services Administration at the University of Maryland School of Public Health in College Park, Maryland. Dr. Thomas is also a director of the Maryland Center for Health Equity. Dr. Thomas is one of the nation's leading scholars in the effort to eliminate racial and 00:00:39 ethnic health disparities. Dr. Stephen B. Thomas has applied his expertise to address a variety of conditions from which minorities generally face far poorer outcomes, including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, obesity and HIV AIDS. He is the principle investigator with Dr. Quinn on the Center of Excellence and Race, Ethnicity and Health Disparities Research funded by the National Institute for Minority Health and Health Disparities. Dr. Thomas, thank you for joining us.

DR. STEPHEN B. THOMAS

00:01:12 It's a pleasure to be with you today.

INTERVIEWER

00:01:36 Thank you, sir. Well, let's start with this. March is National Colon Cancer month. Can you tell us why we should be concerned about colon cancer and specifically why African Americans should learn about this disease?

DR. STEPHEN B. THOMAS

00:01:54 Well, you know, I'm glad it's colon cancer month, but every year we have 50,000 people dying each year from colon cancer, okay, that just doesn't happen in one month. And so I think it's extremely important to use this month to raise awareness of what we know that can actually prevent colon cancer. You know, we know now more 00:02:24 that we've ever known about how to prevent many diseases including colon cancer. So, in 2015 which is the latest year we have the data, more than 132,000 people will be diagnosed with colon cancer in the United States. And we estimate that 49,000 deaths are expected to occur from the disease. And African Americans have the highest rate of 00:02:54 new cases of colon cancer and are most likely to die from the disease.

Now, that's straight from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, and the main reason for this is that African American's are not getting screened in a timely manner. And, you know, the tragedy is that a colonoscopy can actually identify polyps that could turn into cancer, and at the time of the screening 00:03:24 they can be removed. They can literally prevent cancer. There are very few screenings that actually result in that kind of a treatment effect. So, it's a very powerful method and far too many African American's are simply not aware and they're not getting access to care.

INTERVIEWER

00:03:48 For the African American community, are there other types of screenings that we would like to encourage people to help themselves and improve their odds?

DR. STEPHEN B. THOMAS

00:04:07 Well, you know, you'll have the fecal cult blood test that you can take at home and then mail it in. There's a family history - if you have a family history of colon cancer you have an increased risk of developing the disease. And so it's very important that we stop kind of having the secrets in the house, you know, how did Grandma die? No one wants to talk about it. How did Auntie pass away? No one wants to talk about it. But, if that person passed away 00:04:38 from a preventable disease like colon cancer, it's very important that you know about.

And obviously it's important to have a medical home, have a health professional you can talk to. And short of that we find that some people simply don't have that kind of relationship with a healthcare professional, they have a closer relationship with their barber or their stylist. And so that's kind of where we have planted our flag. Building trusts, disseminating information that can save lives, 00:05:36 not through the hospital network or the clinics, but through barber shops and beauty salons.

INTERVIEWER

00:05:44 Can you describe the environment in a typical African American barber shop or beauty salon that makes it appropriate for conversation about health and wellness with the customer?

DR. STEPHEN B. THOMAS

00:05:56 Well, you know, I don't know where you get your hair cut, but I can tell you that no self-respecting black barber would ever say, I'll get you in and out in 15 minutes, okay? And so you can spend half a day in the barber shop, and it's not all about getting your hair cut, it's also about catching up on things, whether it's sports or what's happening in the neighborhood. And we, you know, I go to black barber shops, I've seen this phenomena first-hand. I didn't really connect it to my research 00:06:27 until I recalled a day that one of the patrons who the barber's hadn't seen in a while showed up. And, yeah, the football games on, the music's on and everybody's talking, and they asked Joe, his name was Joe, they said, Joe, where you been? And he said he'd been in the hospital, that they rushed him into the emergency room, he had passed out and they told him that he had had 00:06:55 a heart attack and they kept him in the hospital for two days and diagnosed him with uncontrolled hypertension and gave him medicine that he'd have to take for the rest of his life.

Now, I'm, you know, if everybody's in the barber shop, you're picking up this conversation as it closer, but then the barber started speaking, the barber says, Joe, if you take those pills you won't be able to keep up your obligations. Now, 00:07:26 you'd almost have to have a movie clip to see everybody's head turn. You won't be able to keep up your obligations. And I am telling you the look on Joe's face, I said, he's not going to take those pills. He's been in the emergency room, hospitalized for two days, given medication, but hears from his barber if he takes those pills he may have erectile dysfunction, 00:07:55 for your listeners who don't know what

obligations are. I could see he was not going to take those pills. And I realized at that moment, what if the barbers were partners in disseminating accurate information or helped their patients recognize that, listen, if you're having side effects or symptoms, tell your doctor, they can prescribe a different version of the medication. It's very important 00:08:26 that if you are diagnosed with hypertension and you're given medication to take for the rest of your life that you actually take it. And so that was the beginning of our effort to train barbers, to respect their locals, to learn the history.

It's a rich history of black barber shops and beauty salons in the United States, and we realize that it's also a place where entire families come. 00:08:55 Mothers, fathers aunts, uncles and it is that kind of village environment in the barber shop and the beauty salon that we realize was untapped resource to help get the word out to the African American community and a setting they trusted about how to save their lives and how they could take control of their own health. And it has blossomed into a entire campaign that we call, HAIR. 00:09:27 Health Advocates In Reach and Research. We have a network of ten black barber shops and beauty salons here in the Maryland and Washington, D.C. area, and we've literally transformed them into health information portals in places where the health professional can come and form more trusting relationships with the community that they are committed to serving. It's a beautiful model.

INTERVIEWER

00:09:55 It is a really terrific model and as you said in the black barber shops and beauty salons, the barber being so credible to be able to say, yes or no, on taking the pills, So, you've invited health professionals in and how to you go about the training and education for the barber²s and beauticians who are participating in the program?

DR. STEPHEN B. THOMAS

00:10:25 Well, you know, we spend a lot of time on the ground simply forming the relationships. And we did a very detailed scan in the case of our work here in Maryland. We actually were able to geo code over 5,000 licensed barber shops and salons in the State. Now, this includes - regardless of race, this is around 5,000 licensed facilities in the State and we map those 00:10:55 on using geographic information systems. And if you overlay on top of that map health statistics, guess what you find? You'll find that where you have some of the highest concentrations of Type II Diabetes, obesity, smoking, cancer, when you overlay that on that same map you're going to find a concentration in black neighborhoods. And then when you see that and you see that there are barber shops 00:11:24 in those neighborhoods, not grocery stores, you see there are beauty salons in those neighborhoods, but not hospitals or clinics, you'll recognize that you have a population at increased risk.

And instead of waiting for them to show up in your emergency room, we have convinced these hospital systems to actually work with us to bring their health professionals into the shops, and they too need training, because many of these shops are in locations and neighborhoods, but a lot of our health professionals simply don't go or may 00:11:59 even may be afraid to go. And the reality is that we don't have a lot of racial ethnic diversity among the health professions and so it is likely the health professionals will be white and maybe the first time they've ever been in a black barber shop or a beauty salon. And to see them transformed as health professionals, to recognize that, hey, here's a setting where I am finally 00:12:24 reach the people that I'm not

meeting in the hospital for whatever reason. And for the barber's, they have gone through formal training, particularly around our campaign on colorectal cancer screening, they've gone through formal training without team here and what we call our HAIR curriculum. And thanks to Cigna, the Cigna Foundation provided funding for us through their World of Difference grants 00:12:56 to actually expand the training of our barber shop network.

So, they came to the University, and this is what they wanted. They wanted to come on the university campus and to go through their training, and we also did a few of the trainings actually in the shops themselves. Most Monday's black barber shops and beauty salons are closed, and so we would open those shops up on Monday and turn them into classrooms and we would pay the barber's 00:13:26 for their time, and that's very important. These are entrepreneurs and it's very important that even in the area of promoting health and preventing disease that we don't get in the way of them making a living. And what we have found is that bringing health information into their barber shops, elevating them as professionals, not only in the area of hair, but in the area of health education, health being 00:13:54 health advocates, they're very proud. And we actually believe we've created more business for them. So, it's a win-win all the way around.

INTERVIEWER

00:14:05 So, we've talked about the barber shops, we've talked about the healthcare professionals and that wonderful situation of helping them understand the diversity and getting out in the community. What about the customers, how have they reacted when barbers and beauticians have been talking to them about either colorectal cancer or screenings or any of the other types? What's been going on there?

DR. STEPHEN B. THOMAS

00:15:06 Well, you know, we have been watching that as well, because you don't want to be intrude. So, people come to the barber shop or the beauty salon because trying to get their hair done. And so you have to be very careful in how you, again, that your presence doesn't disrupt business. But what we have found is just a tremendous embrace of the model, especially among the customers. The customer's say, this is a great idea. You know, the black barber shop 00:15:35 and beauty salon is a place where all of the divisions that we have between us break down. There's a lot of diversity in the black community. So, even though we may all be African American sitting in the black barber shop, you've got the African American judge and the African American janitor and the African American unemployed man or the returning citizen, someone who's just gotten out of prison, all in the barber shop at the same time.

The common denominator is 00:16:05 they're there to get their hair - you know, get a haircut and to catch up. So, when you level the field like that, when you create a space - there are very few spaces where people come together across these different class and social economic and education line, but it happens in a black barber shop. They have been tremendously supportive and thankful. And so, again, you start slow and as the barbers were telling us, 00:16:36 hey, so and so went and got their colonoscopy and they had a polyp removed and they came back and we're so thankful that we had shared the information with them right here in the chair. And I said, listen, in my field we call that an anecdote, it's a story, but if we really want to prove that this works we're going to have to do some systematic research. And, again, thanks to Cigna and the World of Difference grants we were able to hire 00:17:06 graduate students and train them in

conducting family health histories. And so we have done over 200 family health histories in the barber shop.

That means I'm sitting down with you in the barber shop and we're talking about the causes of death and illness in your family, at least three generations. And we take that information by hand in the barber shop, then we bring it back here to the 00:17:35 university and we enter it into a special software program called Progeny. And then you're going to get in the mail a nice computer generated pedigree of your family, again, with cause of death and illnesses, but with health education materials specifically related to your family risk factor profile, and people are so grateful. Then 30 days later they get a phone call from us and that's - my team's in the field right now making these follow-up 00:18:05 phone calls, how did they use that information, did they share it with their family members, did they actually go to the doctor, have they scheduled a colonoscopy if they were warranted. And from our preliminary data I'm just pleased to share with you and your audience that people are responding positively. They're so thankful that someone took the time to talk to them and prepare information that was specified for their needs. 00:18:33 That doesn't happen typically anymore when you go to doctor, no one has time, but there's time in the barber shop and beauty salon and it's working.

INTERVIEWER

00:18:44 Wow, congratulations. I mean, [laughs] it's just - this is the - you know, one of the things that we sort of think about working here is that, you know, every once in a while we say we can have an effect on people's lives. You are doing that day in and day out and that must be so uplifting.

DR. STEPHEN B. THOMAS

00:19:00 Well, you know, there are times when you get discouraged, but it only takes going to the barber shop, recognizing that you actually might save a life, because as I told our friends at Cigna, when you look at the cost associated with colon cancer and the fact that it could actually be prevented, it would not take many cases for us to prevent 00:19:30 in order to pay for this entire project, not only here in Maryland and D.C., but across the country. That is our aim, to literally mobilize black barber shops and beauty salons across the nation to get engaged and help promotion disease prevention. And that would include colon cancer, but all the other risk factors associated with colon cancer. And those risk factors are, you know, smoking, physical inactivity, 00:20:01 sedentary life styles, you know, consuming a lot of red meat, lack of vegetables in the diet.

So, we're now educating people to how to make sure that it doesn't happen in the next generation, so that's the other lesson we've learned. Sometimes people won't do things for themselves out of the fear that knowing is worse than not knowing, 00:20:30 but they'll do things for their children and their loved ones and that is a lesson we've learned to motivate people to take charge of their own health.

INTERVIEWER

00:20:46 it's really an amazing thing to have this much effect on people, I really appreciate what you're doing.

DR. STEPHEN B. THOMAS

00:21:18 Well, it'd be great broadcast out of the barber shop, one of these pod casts. [laughs]
Now that would be a lot fun. [laughs]

INTERVIEWER

00:21:28 Can we take you up on that?

DR. STEPHEN B. THOMAS

00:21:30 Absolutely, because you know what, we've started with this and I told our friends at Cigna, yes, colon cancer was the issue. But, when you get inside you realize that people come with everything, all their issues and needs and all of a sudden it starts pouring out. Here's somebody who may benefit from talking to a counselor. Here's someone who may benefit from talking to a marriage and family therapist. They've got a whole range, and we've got to wrap around them all their needs. 00:22:00 So, while we've started with colon cancer and gastroenterologist's coming into the barber shop, we now have nutritionist's coming in, we now have counselor's coming in.

So, it is something that could really take off. And I think for your listening audience to actually hear the ambient sound, [laughs] the clippers, everything that happens in a black barber shop, and I'm an authentic black barber shop, old school, where you have to wait around 00:22:29 for your turn kind of black barber shop, no appointments, that it would just be great radio, great pod cast material and we'd love to take you.

INTERVIEWER

00:22:42 We would love to do that with you. That is - that's an uplifting part of this thing right now, so yes, yes and yes please. That would be really great. Is there anything that I missed, Dr. Thomas, that...

DR. STEPHEN B. THOMAS

00:22:54 Well, I want to make sure that your listening audience knows that the HAIR network, Health Advocates In Reach in Research, our network of black barber shops and beauty salon's is working right now on a mobile app, it should be available before the end of the year, and we would love to have them sign up and identify their barber shops and beauty salon's that they would like to be part of the network.

INTERVIEWER

00:23:48 Terrific. Thank you, so much for this and we're looking forward to more engagement with people. And, yes, people sign up as you can and thank you, so much for your time.

DR. STEPHEN B. THOMAS

00:24:01 Make it a great day.