

The Best Kept Secret

One of the truly “best kept secrets in town” is that you don’t have to be sick. In America, nine out of ten deaths that occur are what Dr. C. Everett Koop, former Surgeon General under President Ronald Reagan called, “preventable or premature deaths.” These are deaths that could have been avoided or delayed if the individual would have followed a different lifestyle.

When we speak of needless deaths in this country, it is nowhere more evident than in African American communities. African Americans have the shortest life expectancy of any group in America, and this is especially true for the African American male. Whether it is Heart Disease, Cancer, Strokes, Diabetes, Kidney Failure, HIV/AIDS or Homicide, African Americans are number one when it comes to these causes of death. But the “Good News” is that it doesn’t have to remain that way.

Choice Not Genetics

As we celebrate Black History Month, we can create a new legacy or history for ourselves. We can again start seeing ourselves as the head and not the tail. The issue as to whether or not we become a victim of one of these diseases is “Choice not Genetics”. Even today, if you look across the waters and examine the health of our African kinship, you would find that most of the chronic diseases that plague our communities are almost non-existent on the continent, especially in rural countries and villages where many ancient lifestyle habits are still practiced.

A study of a prominent hospital in Kenya, for instance, examined admissions over a 2-year period of time and found that in the 1800 admissions there was not a single case of hypertension. Hypertension, which is called the silent killer, is an epidemic in our community and serves as a feeder for Heart Disease, Strokes and Chronic Kidney Failure. In addition, in that same study they found not a single case of Heart Disease, the number one killer in African American and Caucasian communities across the United States.

The Truth About Hypertension

Dr. Dennis Burkett, the Nobel prize winning physician who showed the relationship between viruses and cancer, found in his 24 years of practice in Uganda not one case of Colon Cancer.* How could this be? Many scientists and researchers that have looked at this phenomenon have concluded that, in Uganda, it is their plant-based diet that is the single most important contributor to their low cases of colon cancer and many of the other chronic diseases so familiar to our community.

In fact, we have, in many cases, come to think of diseases like hypertension and diabetes to be enviable. Many churches and institutions are at the point that they don’t even try to prevent them or have blood pressure screenings for them anymore. Blood pressure screenings used to be commonplace as healthcare professionals attempted to at least detect this monster. This was important because at least one article has called Hypertension the number one risk factor in death and disability in the world. But in our community, if you are 40 and are not on blood pressure meds it is seen as uncommon because everyone else is on them.

The Myth About Sickness

There are a lot of false narratives when it comes to why are we so sick. It is often alleged that it is because of the poor standard of health care in our community. Well, I am certainly not going to be a mouthpiece on behalf of the health industrial complex in this country, nor sugar-coat their sometimes racist policies when it comes to their treatment of patients from our communities. But let's not give them more power or control over our communities than they should have.

I believe that we are sick not because of a lack of insurance or health care facilities. Those factors are especially critical for the more acute injuries and illnesses. But for the chronic illnesses that we are facing, we need to start looking in the mirror and recognize that there are some things that we can do to stop the flow of sickness and death. Illnesses that we have grown to expect can be prevented, and in some cases even reversed.

The Myth About Genetics

Another myth that I would like to briefly address is that we are sick because of our poor genetics. The truth is, the main source of our genes come from our African ancestors. And their genes have stood the test of time resisting many of diseases like these for centuries. The common denominator with all these chronic illnesses that remains is lifestyle.

But we also can't just single out one factor because truthfully there are many. If I were to name a few I would have to of course mention our poor diets in fat and processed rich foods. Foods that we have had the nerve to protect and champion because they are viewed as part of our ethnic heritage. I believe that chitterlings and pigs feet should not be considered heritage, but rather a relic from slavery that we should keep in our past in the same way we have kept slavery, indentured labor, and share chopping.

We Need to Choose Exercise

Another contributor to the disproportionate death rates in our communities is our lack of exercise. As a little boy I grow up seeing sports and exercise as natural. Of course we did a lot of our walking out of necessity and not because we were health conscious. But whatever was our motivation, modern research has come to show that daily exercise is certainly an important tool to have in your arsenal for a healthy, disease free life. Exercise is also one of the things that aids in extending life expectancy.

Some years ago when I first shifted my focus from surgery and entered the area of preventative and alternative medicine, I was impressed to start an exercise program for seniors. It was my belief that if I could help these seniors that were discarded, and in many instances seen as past their usable prime, I could help anyone.

I got permission from a Housing Development to go into some of their senior buildings in Washington DC to put their residents on a progressive exercise program. The research preparation for this project had indicated that seniors could regain up to 20 years of function with 4 to 6 weeks of exercise. I actually thought the possibility of an 80-year-old being able to function as a 60-year-old was highly unlikely, yet I went forward. Well, to my utter

shock I was wrong. The transformation I saw in the participants in the program was earth shaking. By choosing exercise, the seniors I worked with chose life.

Don't Forget About Stress

But diet and exercise are not the only factors that need to be considered. When talking about diseases that plague our communities and what we can do to change such a reality we must also, for a moment, touch on stress. I have said for many years that stress is the number one cause of death in African American communities in particular, and across this country in general. When we look at heart disease, cancer, hypertension, diabetes and many other chronic illnesses, stress is a consistent component. However, I believe that all too often we misunderstand stress and its origins.

I believe that our stress comes from mainly within not without. In other words, your stress is not because of a racist boss or a nagging spouse. Your stress is actually caused by your response to those stressors. This is not to say that these stressors are ok. We should do everything that we can to eliminate these stressors, but the psychological and physiologic toll that stress produces can be significantly reduced by our taking control of our responses to these unpleasant instances.

I believe that it was our heavenly father that inspired our fore parents to sing much of their troubles away. By taking the same approach we can minimize the detrimental effects of this stress while we are at the same time working to eliminate the stressors.

Healing in a Plant-Based Diet

Lastly, I want to get back to the subject of the plant-based diet. The important fact that I would like to emphasize is that some plant based diets can prevent these chronic diseases like hypertension and colon cancer, but they can also reverse many of these horrendous killers.

When I started my focus on a more natural/wholistic approach to the practice of medicine I found that many of the "quote" terminal patients that came to me could be completely turned around. I've seen lives extended, in some cases, for many years free of the diseases that had been predicted to be their demise.

I have found that many people think that cutting out their fatty delights may lead to longer life, but to them what is living long if there is no joy, and eating certain foods definitely supplies us with a lot of joy. But, the belief that a good plant-based diet must taste bad is another one of the myths. A myth that is often fed by the same industry that is supplying us with those awful killers. The proper use of herbs and spices and the purchase of a higher quality of food in the first place can quickly show you, that you can eat well as you "eat well."

Yes, we are dying prematurely, but I believe the best way we can save our lives and celebrate our heritage is by getting back to some of the dietary and lifestyle practices of our ancestors. By practicing some of those secret traditions that have sustained them we can access the power we need to revive ourselves and our communities.

Sources

*Phytates for the Prevention of Cancer – Nutrition in Clinical Practice /
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