



Colon Cancer Awareness and African Americans

By Allan Hardy, MD

*"In the End, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends."
—Martin Luther King, Jr.*

I can't help but to think of my birth into the world of practicing medicine. I was aware of the sleepless nights, the sacrifices it would take, and I felt blessed walking across the stage that day to accept my medical degree. I accepted this charge, this responsibility, and took an oath to protect my fellow man from disease. With this mindset, I completed several years of medical training and embarked upon a lifetime of helping people.

As a gastroenterologist I have studied under some of the brightest minds and treated a wide range of disorders involving the liver and digestive system. Acid reflux, hepatitis, irritable bowel syndrome, and yes...colorectal cancer. I pause at this last disease because nothing in my 14 years of medical training prepared me for the most frustrating aspect of dealing with colorectal cancer:

Colorectal cancer screening.

As of 2013, colorectal cancer is the second leading cause of death from cancer in the United States. The most frustrating aspect of this disease, though, is that it can be prevented. Most of the time when cancers develop, you develop symptoms, you see your doctor, we do a million-dollar work-up to tell you what kind of cancer you have and whether or not you're a candidate for a potentially life-saving surgery. Colon cancer is different. The data has shown that screening for colon cancer at age 50 (age 45 for African Americans and Native American Indians) can prevent the cancer and save lives.

Screening can prevent many cases because most colon cancers develop from polyps and these polyps can often be easily removed during a colonoscopy. Data also show that the survival rates are higher the earlier a cancer is caught, so even if a person is 10 years overdue for their screening colonoscopy, they still will benefit from getting it done as opposed to waiting or putting it off.

According to the American Cancer Society, prior to 1989, incidence rates were higher in Caucasian men than in African American men and were similar for women of both races. Then something happened. We're not sure what, but since that time, mortality rates have been higher in African American men and women. Among African Americans, incidence rates are now more than 20% higher

and mortality rates are about 45% higher than those in Caucasians. We are more likely to be diagnosed *after* the disease has spread beyond the colon. To put it bluntly, we don't go to get screened, or if we do get screened, we've often waited so long that not much can be done about it. The situation appears to be worse for men than women. Why aren't we talking about this? The silence is deafening.

Throughout history, we've seen example after example of how silence kills. Silence has allowed an alarming rate of teenage pregnancies to suffocate the dreams of too many of our youth. Silence has allowed too many of our young black men to assume academic disinterest or indifference. Silence in our community delayed the acknowledgment that homosexuality exists and subsequently helped to promote the "down low" phenomenon and the spread of HIV (according to the CDC, in 2006, African Americans comprised 12% of the American population yet represented 45% of all new HIV infections).

We have to accept some of this responsibility. In our barbershops, in our churches, and at the dinner table, we have to talk. Has your father had his colonoscopy? How about your mother, or your wife, or your husband?

Now I've had this discussion—this fight—before, and usually in barbershops. Someone will bring up the word "colonoscopy" and immediately lines are drawn. Some Black men are quick to say, "No one is giving me a rectal exam!" OK, so I'll concede maybe it's not cool, but what is MORE "not cool" is dying years before you had to because you were worried about being "not cool."

Usually there's a voice of reason, often from an older man in the barbershop who had a colonoscopy and realized it wasn't that bad (most people sleep through the procedure and it usually lasts less than 20 minutes), and the topic soon changes back to women, sports, or politics. What happens when these guys go home, though? Do they remember that discussion? Do they act on the information and ask their physician about screening? Statistics would suggest not.

So don't be silent.

This week, I'll go to work and someone won't show up for their colonoscopy or office appointment. I'll wonder if they have a polyp. I'll wonder if they have an early colon cancer that could still be surgically resected. I'll wonder if they knew how important it was. I'll wonder if anybody who cared about them ever urged them or harassed them to get it done.

Please tell the people you care about that they need to see their doctor. Mom, dad, brother, sister, uncle, aunt, barber, pastor, colleague, neighbor—tell anyone who will listen. If they won't listen, tell them anyway. Tell them to ask about getting screened for colon cancer. You could save their life. It doesn't matter how many times they say "I'll think about it." Until they say, "I did it," just keep urging them.

I've been working on someone very close to me for 12 years, and I still won't give up. Come to think of it, I'll end this now so I can call him. It's getting late, and he's probably turning in already. I'll have my mother wake him up. After all, he raised me, so harassing him is the least I can do to show I care.

Dr. Allan Hardy is a board-certified gastroenterologist who works at Rappahannock Gastroenterology Associates in Fredericksburg, Virginia