

BLACKS & ALZHEIMER'S

Awareness, research top priorities

By MARILYN MARSHALL
Defender

The impact of Alzheimer's disease on the Black community is cause for concern. Of the 5.2 million Americans with the disease, 1.1 million of them are African-American. While African-Americans make up less than 14 percent of the U.S. population, they bear a third of the cost of Alzheimer's and other dementias.

Nationally, the African American Network Against Alzheimer's (AANAA) is spreading the word about the disease. AANAA is an initiative of USAgainst Alzheimer's, and strives to unite and mobilize the Black community to speed the pace of research and build momentum to end Alzheimer's.

AANAA arms African-Americans and others with information and connections needed to be heard by the public and decision-makers.

Stephanie Monroe, the director of AANAA, said African-Americans shouldn't "deny" Alzheimer's.

"They need to be mindful of the symptoms when they begin to see them in themselves or their loved ones, and they need to go to the doctor," Monroe said. "There are medicines they can get early on to help improve the quality of life."

In Houston, Baylor College of Medicine focuses on the disease through its Alzheimer's Disease and Memory Disorders Center.

The center provides evidence-based diagnostic and clinical care, as well as opportunities to participate in clinical trials for promising therapies. It also contributes to research designed to learn the causes of Alzheimer's and develop new prevention and treatment



Stephanie Monroe



Dr. Rachelle Doody



Dr. Caryn Glosch

Black clinical trial participants needed

Stephanie Monroe, director of the African American Network Against Alzheimer's, encourages Blacks to participate in clinical trials.

"We want to find a cure for Alzheimer's, but worse than not finding a cure is finding a cure that doesn't work for Black people because we haven't participated in the research," Monroe said. "Only 3 percent of clinical trial participants are African-American, so we need to get those numbers way up."

Interested Blacks between 64 and 85 are urged to learn more about the A4 Study, a clinical trial for older individuals who may be at risk for Alzheimer's. Call 844-247-8839 or visit A2study.org.

strategies.

Dr. Rachelle Doody, M.D., Ph.D, director of the center and a professor of neurology, stresses the importance of research.

"Here at Baylor, we are helping to lead global projects designed to prevent and treat Alzheimer's

disease," Doody said. "We are also part of the state funded research consortium to study the conditions from normal aging through Alzheimer's dementia to develop better ways to diagnose and treat it."

Dr. Caryn Glosch, Ph.D, an assistant professor of neurology at the Baylor center, also shared the good news about research.

"We are learning more and more about how this disease works and about the mechanisms that are involved with the disease process. Even through the failures that we have, the teaching is more about how to affect the disease," Glosch said.

"So we're finding that these therapies and other treatments that we're using didn't work in one population or other set of people but if we can start it earlier maybe we can have more impact on the disease and how we're treating it. We're making a lot of progress and that is a good thing."

Doody added that it's still unknown why Blacks are disproportionately affected by Alzheimer's.

"All communities everywhere in the world are susceptible to AD, but people with cardiovascular risk factors, like high cholesterol and diabetes, are at higher risk," Doody said. "Associated risk factors may play a role in the African-American community."

Glosch wants the Black community to know that Alzheimer's is a real threat. "It's not just normal aging and it's not just senility," she said.

Doody emphasized awareness as well.

"My hope for the African-American community is for it to become informed and to filter information for its members so that they, like all of the communities in Houston, can have the same options for care and research," she said.

Facts & figures

- Alzheimer's disease is not a normal part of the aging process. It destroys parts of the brain responsible for memory, learning, decision-making and behavior. Patients also lose motor abilities like walking and swallowing. The condition is ultimately fatal.

- African-Americans are two to three times more likely than non-Hispanic white Americans to develop Alzheimer's.

- Alzheimer's is the sixth leading cause of death overall in the U.S., and the fourth leading cause of death for older African-Americans.

- There are medicines that can treat the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease but there is no cure. It is the only disease in the top 10 that is increasing and the only disease without a drug that can stop its progression, slow it or prevent it.

- The majority of Alzheimer's cases occur in the South based on cost. The economic burden by region is South, 49 percent; Northeast, 20 percent; Midwest, 18 percent; and West, 13 percent.

- Alzheimer's tops the list of the most feared diseases (54 percent), followed by cancer (26 percent), stroke (10 percent) and heart disease (6 percent).

Sources: African American Network Against Alzheimer's, National Institute on Aging

Alzheimer's discriminates

Prevalence of cognitive impairment

Age	Blacks	Other
55-64	4.8%	1.2%
65-74	12.4%	2.9%
75-84	32.5%	9.8%
85+	54.6%	26.9%

Play 'Forget Me Not' comes to Houston

In an effort to promote awareness of Alzheimer's disease, Baylor College of Medicine, the African American Network Against Alzheimer's, Gdavis Productions and the Defender Media Group are teaming up to bring the award-winning play "Forget Me Not" to Houston.

It comes to the Hobby Center for the Performing Arts on Saturday, Aug. 1, at 2 p.m. Tickets are free of charge but preregistration is required.

"Forget Me Not" focuses on a family struggling to accept and manage their father's illness, and has enlightened audiences nationwide about Alzheimer's disease.

Playwright and producer Garrett Davis said he believes in using the performing arts as a vehicle to raise awareness about health issues affecting the Black community.

The production features Tony Award nominee Samantha McSwain, Kynya Milam, LaTonya Simms, Daren McGill, Javon Belle, Asia Hargrave and Brandon Scott Johnson.

Davis is CEO and founder of Gdavis Productions, based in Winston Salem, N.C. His urban theater company has produced more than 20 plays, and a personal experience inspired him to write "Forget Me Not."

"My grandmother died from Alzheimer's disease and my grandmother was the one who raised me," Davis said. "Coming home from college, and my grandmother not knowing who I was, I didn't know how to deal with that."

"So this play brought closure to that part of my life. The play is not about her life or mine, but it's about dealing with a loved one who has Alzheimer's."

How does he feel about the play's success?

"I won't consider it a success until we find a cure," Davis said. "I'm happy that the play has raised awareness of this disease and caregiving as we've toured the country the last five

years, but we still have a lot of work to do.

"I hope that those who see the play leave with a new sense of hope saying that they're going to get more involved with their family and they're going to get more involved with the resources available to them."

Stephanie Monroe, the director of AANAA, said the organization became involved with "Forget Me Not" to inform and entertain audiences.

"We thought we needed a creative way of reaching the African-American community," Monroe said. "This seemed to be something that would work and it's proven to be extremely successful in every city we go into."

For information on "Forget Me Not" tickets visit www.AfricanAmericansAgainstAlzheimers.org/events or call 202-349-3803.



Garrett Davis