

Study Explores African Americans' Attitudes Toward Research

By Michelle Meadows

Closing the Gap, Putting the Right People in the Right Places • May/June 1999

Many African Americans view signing the informed consent form as signing away rights rather than protecting them, according to a recent study on research participation among African Americans in an urban hospital. The study, co-authored by Giselle Corbie-Smith, MD, will be published later this year in the *Journal of General Internal Medicine*.

The study also revealed African Americans' continuing fear of being treated like guinea pigs because of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study. For 40 years, from 1932-72, government researchers denied treatment to 399 men with syphilis.

The research indicates that we need to do a better job of acknowledging that these fears are real, said Stephen B. Thomas, PhD, a member of the research team. Dr. Thomas is director of the Institute for Minority Health Research and associate professor of community health at the Rollins School of Public Health, Emory University. He said we also need to do a better job of talking with young African Americans about the purpose of research.

African American research participants generally give African American health care providers the benefit of the doubt when it comes to trust. "It's not automatic, but it's an advantage of establishing rapport early on," Dr. Thomas said.

But Dr. Thomas points out that White providers can connect with Black patients and vice versa. And providers and patients of the same race or ethnicity do not always communicate successfully. "You still have a social class gap that can be a barrier to communication." Dr. Thomas said he saw the gap first hand about 10 years ago when he sent a Black graduate student into a public housing complex in Washington, DC. The African American student felt uncomfortable with the poverty she saw, and it was a White student who ultimately connected with the community.

Stressing cultural competence and better preparation for students of all races will become increasingly important, Dr. Thomas said. "We can't throw professionals into situations we haven't prepared them for, regardless of their race."

Dr. Thomas lectured on "Assessing the Legacy of Tuskegee on Participation of African Americans in Medical and Public Health Research" at an anniversary meeting of the 1997 Presidential apology for the Tuskegee Syphilis Study.

Tuskegee and Emory Universities held the meeting May 15-16, 1999. Also on the panel was Fred Gray, founder and president of the Tuskegee Human and Civil Rights Multicultural Center and author of *Bus Ride to Justice* and *The Tuskegee Syphilis Study*.

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