

The Baltimore

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Opinions

Red Dress Sunday: Bringing attention to life-saving knowledge

Commentary



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Americans of color are in a fight for our lives. We will continue to die before our time unless we undertake renewed action to preserve our health.

Knowledge is the key.

A woman in our community (I will call her "Anita") is a living example of this truth. While on a shopping trip in 2003, Anita was momentarily staggered by a crushing pain in the middle of her chest.

After a few minutes, though, the throbbing diminished, and Anita's initial reaction was to dismiss the incident and go on with her day. As a trained health care profession-

al, however, she knew that she had to seek medical care as soon as she could.

The next day, Anita contacted a cardiologist. The tests that followed revealed an obstruction in the left main coronary artery of her heart that required immediate open-heart surgery.

Today, four years after her double bypass operation at the age of 51, Anita has recovered and returned to work. Because of her knowledge, she received the care that extended her life.

Doing all we can to assure that every woman in our community is protected by the same life-saving knowledge that helped to keep Anita alive is the motivation for "Red Dress Sunday" on Feb. 11.

New Psalmist Baptist Church and 25 other African-American congregations in the Baltimore area will participate in this annual "teach in" that focuses on women and heart disease. The day will call attention to the harsh reality that our mothers, wives, daughters and sisters—along with all African-American women—are dispro-

portionately at risk of dying from this condition.

Heart disease, in fact, is the number one killer of African-American women.

More than 6 million American women have coronary heart disease today—although many do not yet realize their peril. That, in part, is why more African-American women die from heart disease than from breast cancer, stroke and lung cancer combined.

These medical facts should sound an alarm in every family; on Red Dress Sunday, the church bells of our community will be ringing a life-affirming response.

Sadly, too many Americans are misinformed about the risks and symptoms of a heart attack.

Sensational movies and television shows have convinced many Americans that heart attacks are always sudden, dramatic and intense events.

Medical research informs us, however, that most heart attacks start slowly, with only mild initial discomfort and

pain.

As a result, lulled into a false sense of relief, far too many heart attack victims wait too long before seeking medical help.

The purpose of Red Dress Sunday is to give African-American women the accurate medical knowledge that will empower them to make the right decisions when danger strikes, just as Anita did when she experienced the first symptoms of her own heart attack.

Thanks to the sponsorship of St. Agnes Hospital and the cooperation of area churches, on Feb. 11, at least 15,000 Baltimore-area women will learn how to recognize the risk factors in their own lives and act proactively.

They will be given information about the lifestyle choices that increase their risk of heart disease (like smoking, high blood pressure, excessive weight and physical inactivity) and they will also receive practical advice about the healthier diets and exercise that can extend their lives.

Red Dress Sunday is a statement of empowerment by our local community—an assertion of the value that we should give to every life. Both locally and nationally, it is a vision we must continue to proclaim.

In Congress, I have sponsored and supported legislative proposals for years that would expand our limited access to affordable, high quality health care and increase the federal funding appropriated for life-saving scientific research.

Like the American Heart Association, I have learned to fully appreciate the potential of stem cell research in our continuing search for treatments to reverse degenerative heart conditions. According to leading scientists, embryonic stem cell research can offer new cures for heart disease.

The fundamental ethical question, of course, is which stem cells should be utilized in this scientific work. These are difficult ethical issues for all of us, but it is worth noting that the proposed legislation would limit federal funding to

research that uses only those stem cell lines that would otherwise be discarded and destroyed by fertility clinics.

Recently, I joined 252 of my colleagues in giving House approval to the DeGette-Castle Stem Cell Research Act, H.R. 3. If this legislation is passed by the Senate and we have the votes to over-ride the President's expected veto, we will be able to substantially expand this life-affirming scientific effort.

For now, however, we must focus on our community and on spreading vital health information. We'll start on Red Dress Sunday, Feb. 11, to grasp the knowledge that will save and preserve life. Far too many Americans are dying before their time, but it is my hope that Red Dress Sunday will help reverse this trend.

Congressman Elijah E. Cummings represents Maryland's Seventh Congressional District in the United States House of Representatives.