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## Apathy cited in racial health gap

**Blacks die sooner, diagnosed later than whites. Official wonders what it will take to stir outrage**

By Tracy Wheeler  
Beacon Journal medical writer

**CLEVELAND** - Black newborns die at twice the rate of white newborns.

Black women are diagnosed with HIV and AIDS at 20 times the rate of white women.

Blacks, in general -- whether it's heart disease, diabetes, or cancer -- will be diagnosed later and die sooner than whites. And Dr. Garth N. Graham wants to know why no one seems to care.

"We're apathetic," he said during a speech Wednesday at the City Club of Cleveland. "I'm not sure what it will take to come together and really, really start to treat health disparities as a true public outrage."

As a deputy assistant secretary in the Office of Minority Health (part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), Graham works closely with doctors, hospitals and public health officials across the country -- who have all accepted disparities as a serious threat to the health of blacks.

However, he said, he has heard from only six or seven average citizens. Either they don't know, or don't care, about these health gaps.

"I don't get the outrage (from the public) that I expected to get when I took this job," he said.

He urges people to think about this problem from a different perspective.

What if blacks were charged twice as much for gas as whites? What if black votes only counted as half a white vote? Would we as a society accept that? Would we simply shrug our shoulders and say, "Well, there's nothing I can do about it"?

Graham doesn't think so.

"Not only would African-Americans and Asians and Hispanics and other minorities riot," he said, "white people would, too.... So ask yourself why you would put up with your people dying."

In the past, blacks fought for the right to vote, and won. They fought for civil rights, and won. They fought for equal education, and won.

But the health gap remains. Yes, he said, people are living longer, including blacks.

Treatments have improved. But in many cases, whites have improved at a greater rate than blacks, leaving major gaps.

Health officials are able to point to only one true breakthrough. And that came just last week, when the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported no statistically significant difference in vaccination rates among blacks, whites, Asians and Hispanics for 19- to 35-month-old children.

Twenty years since then-Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare Margaret Heckler released the nation's first report on racial health disparities, Graham said ``you'd be hard pressed to document much in terms of gains or much in terms of momentum" in tackling disparities.

The problem, he said, is that the problem involves too many separate entities -- hospitals, doctors, insurance companies, health departments and, of course, people. No single group can fix the problem, so apathy sets in.

The goal at HHS, he said, is to have a strategic national plan in place later this year, to help set a course for change.

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*Tracy Wheeler can be reached at 330-996-3721 or [tawheeler@thebeaconjournal.com](mailto:tawheeler@thebeaconjournal.com).*