

Cancer education 'is about trust'

Doctors hope to use social, religious groups to distribute information about prostate cancer screening

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Iowa City, Ia. - Middle-aged men might soon learn more at their local barbershop than the town gossip.

Iowa doctors trying to promote prostate cancer screening believe the best way to reach out to men - especially those in high-risk groups - is through religious and social organizations or businesses they frequent, such as neighborhood barbershops.

"It's about trust," said Richard Williams, a urologist at the University of Iowa. "We're trying to give them information through churches and barbershops to help allay their fears. Most men are quite willing to be studied, but it's all in how you approach them."

Prostate cancer is more common than any other cancer for Iowa men and is the No. 2 cause of cancer deaths after lung cancer, according to 2005 cancer projections released Tuesday. One in six Iowa men will be diagnosed with prostate cancer in his lifetime, said Charles Lynch, a U of I epidemiology professor and director of the State Health Registry of Iowa.

But death rates from prostate cancer are declining, and U of I doctors said increased screening may be the reason.

Early research shows that doctors are detecting prostate cancer earlier, which gives patients a better chance at survival, Williams said. "The stage of cancer when we diagnose it has changed substantially," he said.

In 1990-92, 73 percent of diagnosed cases of prostate cancer in Iowa were confined to the prostate gland or had spread only slightly. Ten years later, 91 percent of cases were in these early stages, according to the cancer registry. There are now long-term clinical trials under way that will show whether increased screening is the reason for lower death rates, Lynch said.

Researchers at the U of I are also developing recommendations for prostate cancer screening in men older than 75 and have completed the first phase of a trial of a vaccine for treating prostate cancer patients who have not responded well to other methods.

People most at risk of prostate cancer are older men, blacks, Hispanics and men with a family history of the disease.

Paul Heidger, 63, a researcher in the U of I's Department of Anatomy and Cell Biology, knew he was at risk of prostate cancer because his father died of the disease. Heidger started regular screenings, which included tests of his prostate specific antigen (PSA) levels and digital rectal exams, about six years before he was diagnosed with prostate cancer last April.

"I was motivated as a scientist and also knowing the suffering our family endured," Heidger said of the screenings. He chose to have his prostate removed, which has proved successful in evicting the cancer.

Heidger's father, who died at age 74, ignored early symptoms, which can include pain in the prostate gland, difficulty urinating or frequent urination, his son said. But new education campaigns have helped erase the taboo of discussing prostate cancer, he said.

"Men are talking more frankly among themselves, on the golf courses or the tennis courts," Heidger said. "It's kind of a joke among the retired and near-retired, 'What's your PSA level?'"

National groups, like Us TOO, a prostate cancer education and support group, are getting the word out among minority populations.

"Just putting brochures in places is not working," said Eugene Wheeler, program director for minority and underserved programs for Us TOO. Wheeler contacts leaders of community centers, churches and urban leagues, among other groups, to ask them how best to reach men about the need for prostate screening.

"Momentum is building. It's a slow process," Wheeler said.