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African-Americans suffer from CFS at higher rate, commonly overlooked than in whites

by Joe Ruklick

More people of color suffer from Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS) than do white people, but the disease is commonly overlooked by doctors, according to a DePaul University study released Sunday.

It found, CFS afflicts 800,000 Americans, twice the number previously reported by the U.S. Center for Disease Control.

Among African-Americans, the CFS prevalence rate is 337 per 100,000 people, compared to a rate of 310 per 100,000 white people.

Its prevalence among Latinos is more than twice that of African-Americans.

Professor Leonard Jason, Ph.D., of DePaul's psychology department, studied 28,000 Chicago adults and found that CFS is a chronic health problem that afflicts many in the prime of their lives.

The result has significant national, economic importance

in its adverse effect on U.S. productivity and on its victims' work and family lives, he said.

Some CFS symptoms are debilitating fatigue, headache and unrefreshing sleep.

Jason said CFS is often the result of poor health among low-income ethnic groups aggravated by stress, poor nutrition and health care, hazardous occupations and dangerous environmental conditions.

"Individuals who are very sick are not getting diagnosed," Jason said, adding,

"African-Americans that have fatigue problems might not be diagnosed with CFS."

One reason is they may have less access to medical facilities.

Some are not getting any medical care or are told by doctors things like 'You have four kids and people with kids are tired!'

Rene Taylor, Ph.D., who co-authored the DePaul study,

said that until now there has been no research similar to the Jason study using a multi-ethnic, economic diverse sample because many health care professionals believe CFS affects only white, high-achieving, middle-class women.

"Media stereotypes have trickled down to medical practitioners and researchers and created a bias about the disease," she said.

"More lower-economic people suffer from the syndrome and are ignored," Jason said, adding, "Compared to Caucasians, African-Americans with the disease are actually sicker."

Physicians are not looking close enough at people."

The DePaul study found that 90 percent of their sample represented people who have undiagnosed CFS.

That, Jason said, indicates many people in the general population are undiagnosed or are getting medical care that

overlooks the disease.

Carole Howard, president of the Chicago Chronic Fatigue Syndrome Association, blames doctors.

"They need to listen and have patience," she said of physicians who see possible CFS sufferers.

"They've got to understand it's a legitimate illness."

Many doctors say, 'It's all in your head.'

They have to follow the protocol, eliminate look-alike diseases, and when symptoms persist for six months, they need to know the definition of CFS is met."

Many low-income people lack access to the healthcare system, Jason said, because their doctors rely on referrals from physicians or clinics where the prevalence of CFS is underestimated.

"People who treat victims of CFS, unfortunately, will often say they rarely see patients of minority backgrounds," he

said.

Jason said doctors who specialize in treating the disease mainly treat Caucasians.

"My sense is that when it involves African-Americans who get sick, sometimes they don't see the medical personnel to give them an opportunity, and if they get medical care, they are told it's alcoholism, or the aftereffects of a gunshot, or it's depression.

In reality, they are individuals who are very sick. Over 90 percent in our Chicago sample were not getting proper diagnosis," he said.

Taylor said effects of the disease on children can be as severe as its effects on adults. "A child can be very, very ill and school officials, parents and doctors don't recognize the illness."

Some say 'You just don't want to go to school,' when the child is actually suffering from the disease," she said.