

The Health Reform Debate and Prostate Cancer

James Morning

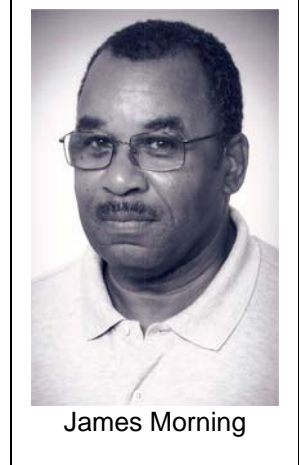
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Prostate cancer is the most common form of cancer in men, striking approximately 200,000 men each year.

African-American men are at the highest risk.

Every year, over 27,000 men die of the disease, making it second only to lung cancer as the deadliest cancer in men. Caught early, prostate cancer can be treated, usually successfully. But because many men experience no symptoms, it is often identified only by an abnormal result on a basic prostate cancer screening.

For the last 20 years, doctors have had a powerful weapon in their arsenal for detecting prostate cancer. In addition to the DRE (a physical exam allowing the doctor to feel the prostate), patients can also have a simple blood test called a PSA, which will detect a majority of prostate problems early. In the two decades that the PSA has been used, prostate cancer deaths have declined, and the number of successfully treated prostate cancer cases has risen.



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During September, Prostate Cancer Awareness Month, the Men's Health Network is urging men to talk to their doctors about prostate cancer, and to consider screening at age 50, and at age 40 for African Americans and men with a family history of prostate cancer. The group also encourages women to get involved and urge their husbands to request prostate screening, including a PSA test, from their doctor.

Men's Health Network is not alone in urging prostate cancer screening for men. They are joined by, among others, Women Against Prostate Cancer, the American Cancer Society, American Urological Association, and countless physicians treating patients nationwide.

In fact, the American Urological Association has recently issued guidelines recommending that men receive a baseline PSA test at age 40.

And, in a recent Town Hall meeting, President Obama endorsed routine checkups so we can, "...be catching diseases like breast cancer and prostate cancer on the front end. That makes sense, it saves lives; it also saves money."

If you are on Medicare, prostate cancer screening is a part of your Welcome to Medicare physical, the free comprehensive physical exam you receive in your first year of eligibility. For younger men, 37 states require that insurance companies offering health insurance provide coverage for prostate cancer tests. Insurance companies may offer prostate cancer screening in the remaining states, but are not required to do so.

But in the rush to save money, and “reduce...unnecessary tests and services,” a goal we all agree is necessary, Congress may take away that benefit. While President Obama has stated, “...we will require insurance companies to cover routine checkups and preventive care (to catch) diseases like breast cancer and prostate cancer on the front end,” Congress is moving in another direction.

The health care bills currently being debated in Congress contain a number of health insurance options, and it looks like none of those options will cover prostate cancer tests. Instead, the health insurance system established by those bills will rely on the opinions of a government-sponsored committee, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force, that does not recommend prostate cancer screening.

The bottom line? Having an annual prostate exam, including a PSA test, just might save your life. No matter what age you are, that annual PSA test creates a benchmark against which to judge future tests.

When you receive your PSA test results, ask the doctor what your PSA number is, write it down, and compare it against future tests. If the number goes up in future tests, talk to your doctor.

September is Prostate Cancer Awareness Month. It's the perfect time to call your doctor, schedule an appointment, and get your prostate cancer test done. Then, talk to your doctor and determine what screening and treatment options are best for you and your family.

If you want to express your opinion about health reform, call your members of Congress and let them know what you think. Use the Capitol switchboard, 202-224-3121, to call both senators and your representative. If you do not know their names, give your Zip code to the operator who answers, and they will connect you.

About the author: James Morning, a prostate cancer survivor, is a retired Air Force master sergeant who was exposed to Agent Orange. He is a state coordinator for the Men's Health Network.