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MEDIA RELEASE

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Johns Hopkins Health Disparities Expert Criticizes CNN Report

Baltimore – Promoting unproven theories as a key cause of the enormous health gap between African Americans and other ethnic groups will likely widen the gap further, said the nation’s leading researcher working to close the gap.

Thomas A. LaVeist, PhD, Director of the Center for Health Disparities Solutions at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health was alarmed when he saw the health care segment of CNN’s “Black In America” series and heard the salt-sensitivity theory being promoted as a key reason to explain why blacks are unhealthy compared to whites and other groups.

“I commend CNN and Soledad O’Brien for tackling this very important topic, but to expose an audience to this theory is very troubling and disappointing,” LaVeist said.

During the segment, O’Brien interviewed Harvard economist Roland Fryer who said he believes the salt-sensitive theory may be key to unlocking why blacks on average have poor health. The salt-sensitivity theory claims that during the transatlantic slave trade, African slaves whose bodies held higher levels of salt were better able to survive the long brutal voyage to the Americas. Their descendants are now genetically disposed to hypertension and other diseases that are tied to salt.

“This bogus theory just won’t seem to die,” LaVeist said. “Even though public health researchers have discredited the theory it continues to be promoted by people who are not knowledgeable about the field. THE AVERAGE HEALTHCARE CONSUMER WATCHING CNN COULD TAKE THIS AS THE GOSPEL AND RUN WITH IT TO THEIR OWN DETRIMENT.”

Most research scientists who work on this public health problem would agree that some of the key health disparity causes are:

- Blacks are exposed to more environmental toxins because of residential segregation
- Blacks have less access to quality healthcare
- Higher levels of poverty among African Americans

- Higher levels of use of harmful products such as cigarettes
- Less healthy diets
- Less healthy foods in African American communities
- Residing in more stressful environments

“To suggest that health disparities are caused by a gene that exists in African Americans and does not exist in others is ridiculous. There are no genes found in only one race group,” LaVeist said. “Hypertension and all other major causes of death are caused by a complex set of factors. They are not single gene diseases. If race disparities were primarily caused by a gene, that gene would have to cause hypertension and cancer and diabetes and glaucoma, and Crohn’s disease and asthma and HIV-AIDS and every other condition that is more prevalent in blacks and we know no one gene does that.”

“I respect professor Fryer, but quoting an economist as an expert on health disparities is like interviewing me for a story about why gas prices have spiked,” LaVeist said. “Not only are researchers at Hopkins working on this problem, but people are working on this issue right there in Atlanta where CNN is headquartered. The problem of health disparities is complex. By trying to reduce it to a simplistic explanation we risk having health care providers, policymakers and patients feel there is nothing they can do to address the issue.”

About Thomas LaVeist:

As the William C. and Nancy F. Richardson Professor in Health Policy, and Director of the Hopkins Center for Health Disparities Solutions at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. LaVeist has studied the major healthcare gaps in America, the trends causing them and the problems they create. His work is enabling healthcare organizations and individuals to prepare for a new America—a minority majority.

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