ICHAD Salutes MLK’s Legacy, Calls for Regional Response to Racial Inequality in Health

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While many people have heard one jarring statistic after another about the health of blacks in the United States, far less attention has been given to the fact that blacks across the Western Hemisphere – not just in America – tend to fare worse in health compared to their white counterparts. From Canada to the tip of South America, blacks tend to live sicker and die younger than whites.

Dr. Thomas LaVeist, director of the Hopkins Center for Health Disparities Solutions (HCHDS) at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health says that one of the most meaningful ways to honor the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., is to carry the civil rights leader’s torch into the struggle to end racial inequality in health. “It doesn’t matter what flag you wave,” said LaVeist, “wherever we have available data we find that black populations in the region tend to bear a greater health burden. They also tend to have less access to vital resources for prevention and health care.”

Throughout the region, black descendants of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade share a common history of forced migration and chattel slavery followed by systematic discrimination and marginalization. As these populations evolved they experienced variations in social and cultural experiences, with ample evidence showing both differences and commonalities in health status among slave descendants.

A recurring phenomenon: There appears to be a stark racial gap in health between whites and blacks throughout the region. “This beckons us to revisit Dr. King’s vision for racial equality and ask in earnest, “What must we do about this?”” said LaVeist.

Since 2002, the HCHDS has been a national leader in addressing the health status of blacks and other vulnerable populations in the US, publishing over 300 articles in scientific journals and partnering with policymakers and community leaders to foster change. The center is now widening its lens on black health, exploring what is known
about the health of over 60 million slave descendants living throughout North America, South America, Central America and the Caribbean.

On July 4-8, 2012, the HCHDS will host the International Conference on Health in the African Diaspora – ICHAD 2012. The conference, which will be in held in Baltimore, will bring together people from across the hemisphere – including researchers, public leaders, health advocates, and grassroots activists – to explore what we know about the health of blacks in the region and what should be done to improve it.

“The ICHAD project is a wonderful opportunity to convene the best and the brightest minds to spark innovations in science, build partnerships across countries, and identify solutions to the tough health problems faced by populations in the African Diaspora,” said Lisa Cooper, M.D., director of the Johns Hopkins Center to Eliminate Cardiovascular Disparities at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine.

LaVeist, the chairman of ICHAD 2012, says the magnitude and persistence of racial inequality in health is a powerful indicator that galvanized action is needed across many different sectors of our society, including policy, research, the healthcare system, local communities and individuals.

Public health researchers says there is a huge need to gather and synthesize valuable information about black health across the hemisphere and to stimulate dialogue between stakeholders in different countries who would benefit from sharing knowledge, resources and the sheer energy of their common commitment.

“In many countries like Honduras and Panama and Colombia information about racial disparities in health is not as systematically reported as it is in the United States,” said Josephine Etowa, PhD, Associate Professor of the School of Nursing at the University of Ottawa and member of the ICHAD 2012 Advisory Committee. Etowa said this leaves a gap in what we know, and since resources tend to flow toward problems that are visible – the squeaky wheel gets the grease – countries with a paucity of data on health inequality are poorly positioned to address this challenge.

At the same time, there is a need to move from information to action, said LaVeist, whose health disparity research center is funded by the National Institutes of Health. “It’s not just about gathering data from these countries - though this is much-needed,” said LaVeist. “More fundamentally it’s about heeding the important lesson that Dr. King taught us about the urgency of translating what we know into what we can do to make a better world. This was Dr. King’s greatest legacy,” he said.

The International Conference on Health in the African Diaspora is funded by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. More information about the upcoming conference is available online at www.ICHAD.com and at www.facebook.com/ICHADSummit.