National Black Family Cancer Awareness Week:
Improving Cancer Outcomes Through Education and Community Engagement

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Each year, National Black Family Cancer Awareness Week serves as an important reminder that cancer does not affect all communities equally. A cancer diagnosis can bring tremendous uncertainty as well as many difficult decisions. For Black Americans, those challenges are often compounded by higher rates of certain cancers (breast, prostate, lung, colorectal, and cervical), later diagnoses, and lower survival rates. While progress has been made in cancer research and treatment, persistent disparities underscore the need for greater awareness and education, earlier detection, and more equitable access to care.

Cancer is the second leading cause of death in the United States, but for Black Americans, the impact is especially severe. Black men, for example, are more likely to develop and die from prostate cancer compared to any other racial or ethnic group in the United States. In addition, Black women are more likely to be diagnosed with aggressive forms of breast cancer, such as triple-negative breast cancer, and at younger ages. They are also approximately 40 percent more likely to die from breast cancer than white women. In the United States, Black women are more likely to die from cervical cancer than other women. Colorectal cancer and lung cancer also contribute significantly to higher death rates in Black communities. The disparities noted are not due to biology alone and are influenced by a range of factors, including differences in access to care, socioeconomic conditions, environmental exposures, and systemic inequities within the healthcare system. Just as importantly, delays in diagnosis and treatment often reduce the chances of successful outcomes and survival according to research supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Many Black patients face obstacles such as limited access to primary care providers, lack of insurance or underinsurance, transportation challenges, and fewer nearby cancer specialists where they reside. Additionally, navigating the healthcare system can be complicated since patients may not always receive clear explanations of their diagnosis or are not aware of all the available treatment options. One's overall experience can be further impacted by gaps in communication along with implicit bias. Studies have shown that Black patients are less likely to be offered certain advanced treatments or spoken to and/or enrolled in clinical trials, which can limit access to cutting-edge cancer therapies.

These barriers highlight the importance of culturally congruent awareness and education to ensure that all patients and their families have the necessary information, support, and confidence to ask questions and explore all available options for their care and needs.

Another critical factor to consider are the historical injustices and ongoing disparities that have contributed to a lack of trust in the medical system among some members of the Black

community. This can lead to delays in seeking care or hesitancy in following through with recommended treatments.

A cancer diagnosis is life-changing, and treatment decisions can feel overwhelming. Seeking a second opinion is one of the most important steps patients can take to ensure they fully understand their diagnosis and treatment options. For patients and families, a second opinion can provide reassurance and confidence in their treatment plan, and can also open the door to clinical trials or innovative therapies that may not have been initially discussed. Many healthcare providers support and encourage second opinions, recognizing that informed patients are better equipped to make decisions about their care. Therefore, patients should feel empowered to ask concerning questions, request copies of their medical records, and explore care options at different institutions, if desired.

Cancer does not affect individuals alone, it impacts entire families and communities. Open conversations about family health history, risk factors, and screening can help guide decisions about when to begin screenings. Encouraging loved ones to stay up to date with screenings such as mammograms, colonoscopies, pap smears, and prostate exams can help save lives of those you love and care about.

Community organizations, faith-based groups, and local leaders play an essential role in spreading awareness and connecting individuals to resources. By fostering environments where people feel safe discussing health concerns, communities can help reduce stigma and promote proactive care. In addition, outreach efforts that provide culturally relevant education, mobile screening services, and patient navigation support can help increase participation in risk mitigation.

Reducing cancer disparities requires a collective effort involving all parties and in turn, includes improving access to quality care, increasing representation in clinical research, addressing social determinants of health, and fostering trust through culturally competent care.

In closing and the takeaway from all this is that individuals and families can take meaningful steps today by seeking information, asking questions, and exploring second opinions to take control of one's health journey. As we celebrate National Black Family Cancer Awareness Week, we encourage you to start conversations, prioritize screenings, and remember that you do not have to navigate a cancer diagnosis alone knowing that all of us working together can and will make a difference.

Helpful Cancer Tools and Resources:

- **African American Breast Cancer Alliance**: Raising awareness in Black communities, by providing culturally specific information, resources and peer support for Black/African American women, men and families affected by **breast cancer**.

- **Cancer*Care***: Provides information, resources and supportive services to help Black or African American people with all types of cancer (including **lung cancer**) and their loved ones overcome obstacles to care and support.

- **CDC Face Your Health**: An educational outreach program that encourages African American women to get screened for **cervical cancer**.

- **CDC Nathan**: A human simulation that answers questions you choose from any location and is accessible 24 hours a day making it a convenient option for those with challenging schedules. He shares information about **prostate cancer** screening and treatment in real-time and can suggest questions you might want to ask your doctor.

- **ClinicalTrials.gov**: A database of ongoing **clinical trials** for patients seeking additional treatment options.

- **Colorectal Cancer Alliance:** Nation's leading nonprofit dedicated to **colorectal cancer** advocating for prevention, magnify support, and accelerate research to end this disease.

- **National Cancer Institute**: Provides trusted, research-based **comprehensive cancer information** and access to clinical trials.

- **SCI Breast Cancer and African Americans Conference**: Annual **cancer educational program** dedicated to reducing breast cancer disparities and improving health outcomes for Black and African American communities.