

N.J. helps to study breast cancer's racial divide

To take part

Participants are needed for the Women's Circle of Health study. African-American women who live in Bergen, Hudson, Essex, Passaic, Union, Mercer, Morrmouth and Burlington counties are invited. They must either have had a breast-cancer diagnosis within the previous nine months or, if without cancer, meet certain other criteria. No medications or blood work are involved; a researcher will interview you. All information is kept confidential. For information, call 732-235-8806.

By LINDY WASHBURN
STAFF WRITER

Thousands of women in New Jersey are helping scientists learn more about breast cancer in African-Americans, including why it strikes young black women more aggressively and more often than white women.

They are answering a host of lifestyle questions, providing saliva samples for genetic analysis and allowing researchers to measure their body-mass index as part of the most ambitious project to date to understand why breast cancer affects women of different races differently.

More than 2,400 New Jersey women, including more than 200 each from Bergen and Passaic



Special section: Diet, screenings, support and other issues. **Inside**

counties, have joined the study already.

When New Jersey's participants are combined with those from three other studies nationally, more than 10,000 women — half of them diagnosed with cancer and half of them healthy “controls” — will have participated.

The National Cancer Institute provided \$19.6 million in added funding this summer to allow four separate regional studies to pool their data, making it the largest study of its type.

“Breast cancer in African-American women occurs at an earlier age than in European-American women,” according to the first paper from the Women's Circle of Health study, which began in 2003.

See **DISPARITY** Page A-8



DAVID BERGELAND/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
Alexis Johnson and Joanne English Rollison of Gilda's Club of Northern New Jersey focus on the needs of black women who often face more aggressive forms of breast cancer.

Disparity: Study

It was co-authored by Dr. Elisa V. Bandera of the Cancer Institute of New Jersey and Karen Pawlish of the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services, with 28 others.

Black women are more likely to have high-grade tumors and tumors that don't respond to hormonal therapy, the study has found. But the reasons are unknown, the 2009 report said.

Honoring her mother

Ethel Spray of Teaneck wants to help find out why. Diagnosed last year, she has fully recovered. “When I got the letter [about the study] this past May, I responded to it,” she said. An interviewer visited her and asked about “the type of food you eat, what you drink,” she said. “Sometimes it's something in your past, stress that could bring it on.”

“If there's any type of research or study that can make a difference in anybody's life, I would like to see it done,” Spray said.

Debra Marshall of Elizabeth joined the study as part of the control group last year. She is 35 and healthy, but she knows breast cancer's toll personally: Her mother was diagnosed at age 50 and died in 2006.

Her mother was an oncology nurse. In her honor, Marshall established the Yvonne McCalla Foundation “to empower women and save lives,” she said, by educating them about breast cancer.

“Once I heard about the study [at the Cancer Institute], I jumped on it immediately,” said Marshall, a social worker. She has recruited almost 40 women to join it.

Exploring diet risks

To find cancer patients for the study, the state health department culls the New Jersey State Cancer Registry, to which all new diagnoses are reported by doctors, hospitals and laboratories. State health department staff call them and explain the study, said Pawlish, a state researcher. Those who agree to join

are interviewed at their homes by Cancer Institute staff for about two hours.

This fall, Bandera, the principal investigator in New Jersey, will start evaluating the role of diet and obesity on breast cancer in African-Americans.

Earlier studies established a link between obesity and breast cancer in post-menopausal women, but they focused primarily on white women, she said. “The impact of obesity on breast cancer risk is not well-known,” she said. The findings so far are provocative: Among women with breast cancer, 52 percent of African-Americans in the study were obese, compared with 26 percent of whites.

The study will also be able to look at rare types of breast cancer “that are more common in African-Americans,” Bandera said, including triple-negative breast cancer and inflammatory breast cancer.

The large pool of data formed by combining the Women's Circle of Health Study in New Jersey and New York with three other studies nationally means scientists will have enough women with these rarer subtypes to make valid conclusions about their relationship to various risk factors and genes.

About 1,000 more African-American women in New Jersey are needed as participants over the next four years, Bandera said.

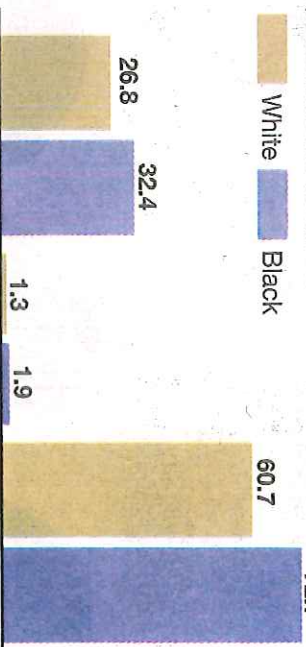
Deadlier among blacks

Black women overall are more likely to die from breast cancer, when all ages are considered. Scientists have found there's more at work than differences in income, health insurance and access to health care.

In New Jersey, an average of 6,554 women received the diagnosis each year from 2005 to 2008, according to the state cancer registry — 5,538 of them white and 698 black. In addition, 1,170 women died of breast cancer annually, on average, from 2003 to 2007 — in-

Mortality rate

Black women of all ages die more often of breast cancer than white women, even though they are less likely to be diagnosed with the disease. Here is a comparison of deaths from breast cancer per 100,000 women, by race and age, and averaged over a five-year period from 2003 through 2007.



Source: New Jersey State Cancer Registry

R.L. REBACH/STAFF ARTIST

cluding 1,007 whites and 165 blacks.

“We found that African-American women were 70 percent more likely to die of breast cancer, compared to white women with breast cancer,” said Pawlish, who analyzed earlier registry data for a paper on cancer survival disparities. Even after controlling for the poverty level of each patient's neighborhood, “African-Americans still had a worse survival rate,” she said. “They were about 45 percent more likely to die.”

Determining what environmental, genetic and lifestyle factors contribute to this disparity is the researchers' next challenge. “I've been finding it [breast cancer] more and more in much younger women, since I've been doing this,” said Cheryl Walters, a 14-year survivor who is president of the Bergen-Passaic chapter of Sisters Network, a national organization of African-American breast cancer survivors.

“Help save a life” That makes it all the more important for groups like hers to try to reach young women with information about risk factors and the importance of annual screening exams after age 40, she said. The Sisters Network picks a neighborhood and goes door to door each year. Gilda's Club of Northern New Jersey also holds educational

events, including one coming up on Oct. 29, focused on the needs of African-American women, under the leadership of Alexis Johnson and Joanne English Rollison, team leaders for the club's cultural outreach department. “I have just one daughter,” said Johnson, a breast cancer survivor who lives in Wyckoff. “If I can't do something to help myself, I can do something for that whole generation of women that are coming up behind us.”

“We're trying to take this whole breast cancer thing out of the closet,” said Rollison, “and let people know that it's not contagious; it's not a disease anybody can get from touching you; it's OK to talk about it.”

“If you let them know at a young age it's OK to talk about it if you feel something in your breast, you can help save a life.”

Passing along this message gives meaning to those who survive the ordeal of cancer treatment. Ethel Spray, who joined the study after her own surgery, said she thought and prayed when she was recovering.

“When I saw my life, my reasons for living, the things we are concerned about,” she said, “I realized the most important thing was to make a difference in somebody else's life.”

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HEALTH CARE NEWS

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Breast cancer events aimed at minorities

By LINDY WASHBURN
STAFF WRITER

Open discussions 'make a big difference'

Jazz evenings, gospel fests, tea parties and health fairs are just part of the effort to reach minority communities in northern New Jersey, as the traditional silence about breast cancer gives way to efforts to encourage preventative screenings and to support those with the disease.

The Bergen County Department of Health holds "breast health awareness" bingo games at churches and libraries. The Sisters Network, part of the national organization for African-American breast cancer survivors, goes door to door each year. Several churches have cancer support groups.

"People are afraid to talk about [breast cancer]," says Joanne English Rolleson of Englewood Cliffs, and cancer fund-raiser. She was diagnosed with cancer the first time at 21. Her son was just a year old when doctors told her parents "When I tell them my story, they'll come up and look at me and say 'Oh, wow, you don't look like you had cancer' — she pauses for effect — 'Well, how am I supposed to look?'"

Rolleson, 50, the president of English Realty Associates in En-

Contact information

For more information about the New Jersey Cancer Education and Early Detection program, which offers screenings for cervical, prostate and colorectal cancers as well as mammograms for uninsured and low-income residents:

In Bergen County, call 201-634-2660. Leave a message and the Health Department will respond.

In Passaic County, call 973-754-2705 for an appointment or 973-754-3646 for additional information.

Gilda's Club of Northern New Jersey, 575 Main St., Hackensack 07601. 201-457-1670, ext. 119.

Sisters Network of Passaic and Bergen Counties, sistersnetworkinc.org; e-mail sistersnetpb4nj@aol.com

glewood, is an avid tennis player around the diagnosis left her emotionally devastated, but she pulled through with faith, family and her own inner strength, she says.

"We show them you don't have to look sick," she says of the events she hosts with Alexis Johnson, the other co-team leader. "You don't have to own the disease." Breast cancer "doesn't mean that you're going to die," she says. "It doesn't have to be a death sentence."

Ethel Spray of Teaneck talked with her sister, Alexis Johnson, Rolleson's co-team coordinator at Gilda's Club.

Johnson discovered her own breast cancer four years ago. Three years ago, she helped start a task force to increase participation by African-Americans in Gilda's Club. "Our focus is to raise awareness that this phenomenal resource is available in the community," she says.

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Additional resources are available through the New Jersey Cancer Education and Early Detection program to those who cannot afford a mammogram. The state and county Health Department and in Bergen County through the federally funded program operates in Passaic County, with that included 808 women screened in Passaic County, with 180 cases of breast cancer diagnosed.

across New Jersey have been screened for breast cancer through these free mammograms, with 180 cases of breast cancer diagnosed. That included 808 women screened in Passaic County, with 13 cancers detected, and four cancer diagnoses in Bergen County.



DAVID BERGELAND/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Alexis Johnson and Joanne English Rolleson do outreach to the African-American community about breast cancer.

Northern Valley Press

S O U T H

ALPINE CRESSKILL ENGLEWOOD ENGLEWOOD CLIFFS TENAFLY

ENGLEWOOD

UNITED AGAINST CANCER

These breast cancer survivors danced and sang at the "Celebrating Life & Liberty" event at Liberty State Park on Sept. 30.

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OCTOBER 8, 2012

HEALTH & FITNESS



Breast Cancer Awareness Month

STRONGER THAN EVER



Photo courtesy Kathleen Sullivan

Breast cancer survivors in the Tennis for Life support group danced and sang Kelly Clarkson's "Stronger) What Doesn't Kill You" at the Hackensack University Medical Center "Celebrating Life & Liberty" event at Liberty State Park on Sept. 30. Tennis for Life is a non-profit organization offering free tennis lessons and court time to people recently treated for breast cancer. For more information, www.tennisforlife.org.

Survivors shown above, from left to right, include Treva Spencer-Dupree, Teannek Roxanne Brittan, Englewood; Karen Halupa, Dumont; Nellie Vitale, Englewood; Joanne English-Kollison, Englewood Cliffs; Lori Gottheim, Woodcliff Lake; and Barbara Lefleur, Tenafly.

Support for families affected by cancer

If your life has been touched by cancer, give Gilda's Club Northern New Jersey a call.

The mission of Gilda's Club Northern New Jersey is to provide social and emotional support when cancer has touched the family. The club's belief is that when cancer happens, it happens to the whole family. The free program includes networking and emotional support groups, workshops, education and social activities.

Gilda's Club programs are designed to provide services to the person living with cancer, along with their family and friends, including children. It also runs a bereavement support

group for when a loved one has died from cancer. Its support groups are run on a weekly basis, and cancer specific networking groups meet once a month. Some of the cancer specific networking groups are for people living with blood cancer, colon cancer, breast cancer and prostate cancer. If you or someone in your life has cancer, call and use this free program for emotional and social support.

Call (201) 457-1670 to become a member or find out more about Gilda's Club programs. The website is www.gildasclubnj.org. Gilda's Club believes that nobody should have to face cancer alone.

NORTHERN VALLEY

NORTHERN VALLEY

FREE BLOOD PRESSURE READING

The Demarest Board of Health holds free blood pressure clinics every second Friday from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the United Methodist Church, 109 Hardenburgh Ave. The clinic is open to all Demarest residents.

CAN'T LOSE WEIGHT? GET A SECOND OPINION
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Deane Penn, MD
Medical Director

End notes

by Lee Lusardi Connor



A CHAT WITH

Joanne English Rollieson

THE 49-YEAR-OLD ENGLEWOOD RESIDENT, A CANCER SURVIVOR AND 'COVER GIRL' FINALIST, ON BEING PRETTY, PREPARED AND POSITIVE

Clear purpose: "I was diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease in my 20s and treated, and in November I will celebrate five years as a breast-cancer survivor. At one point the doctor gave me six months. As a two-time cancer survivor, I feel God has given me another life so I can help someone."

Giving it a whirl: "Once I would never have entered a 'cover girl' contest, but I was like, 'Joanne, why not? I'm doing things I might not have done before. I'll go for it!'"

New priorities: "Before I was diagnosed with breast cancer I was busy, but in the wrong way—working, working, not taking time for myself. I think stress contributes to cancer. Now I'm going to do what I want."

Stay-young secrets: "I always eat a 'colorful' plate of

food, as per my doctor's orders. I work out 20 to 30 minutes every day, a different kind of exercise each day—I have a treadmill, weights, medicine ball and an Ab Rocket." **Makeup maven:** "I enjoy choosing an outfit in the morning and making myself pretty. I lost my eyelashes from chemo, so I put on false eyelashes and all my makeup and have fun. Looking good has a lot to do with attitude."

Maternal wisdom: "I have two sons, Jason, 30, and Marco, 29. My husband and I were strict disciplinarians. They had to do their homework and be home by a certain time. If they wanted a new pair of sneakers, they had to earn it with their behavior."

Dinner engagement: "Kids who don't have a strong family sometimes make the streets their family. For us, dinner together was important. And if something was going on at our house, it was family meeting time."

Best advice: "My father, Whitte English, was the first African-American contractor to build more than 75 Bergen homes. He told me: 'Work hard, then it's OK to play hard'; 'Don't take no for an answer'; and 'You don't have to be a millionaire to look like one.'"

Heels and wheels: "You should have seen me when I was starting out in real estate at age 19! But I wore a suit and high heels and I carried a briefcase, and I got through. If you look the part, they'll respect you. I kept a good credit rating, and that enabled me to invest in real estate. With the money I made, I bought a red Mercedes Benz. I became known as the young agent with the red Mercedes."

'Realtor to the stars': "I got myself invited to entertainment and sports-industry parties—if Puffy [rapper Sean Combs] or the president of Motown was having one. I'd introduce myself as 'realtor to the stars' and say, 'If you want to move to Jersey, see me.' Soon people said, 'Here's Joanne; she works with celebrities.' It was a domino effect."

Easiest sale: "I sold singer Mary J. Blige her house in Cresskill about 10 years ago. It was easy because celebrities know what they want—they don't have to see 100 houses."

Cancer survivor's credo: "Cancer need not be a death sentence. Live life to the fullest, share your story, support others, have faith and be thankful for every day you wake up. Every year I host a fundraiser for Englewood Hospital called the 'Think Pink Spring Bling.' We have pink food and everyone—men, women and children—wears pink."

Makes it worthwhile: "Someone who'd been to one of my parties came up to me a year later and said, 'Thank you, Joanne! When I heard the doctor at your event talk about early detection and self-exams, I found a lump—just in time. I believe you saved my life.'" ■