Black History Month: National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute head discusses health disparities research

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Dr. Gibbons and Dr. Mau are pictured.

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February, Black History Month in America, is meant to bring focus to achievements by African-Americans. It also provides an opportune time to take note of the work being done in the health care and health research arenas to address health disparities among African-Americans.

African-Americans, like people of Native Hawaiian and Pacific Island ancestry, die earlier than most people from other populations in the United States. Many suffer worse outcomes in treatment for cardiovascular disease, diabetes and are under-treated for HIV. As with Native Hawaiian and Pacific Island people, African-Americans have historically experienced barriers to better health care because of their race or ethnicity, education, income, social class or geographic location.

In this video report, we speak with the Director of the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI), Dr. Gary Gibbons, who visited Hawaii last fall, meeting with health researchers and speaking at the He Huliau Conference. Dr. Gibbons is well informed about the challenges facing both the African-American and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Island populations, and the need to invest in solutions. The NHLBI awards approximately $2.3 million annually to support health research at the the University of Hawaii at Mānoa (2016).

UH Med Now caught up with Dr. Gibbons as he accompanied Dr. Marjorie Mau, Principal Investigator and Director of the Center for Native and Pacific Health Disparities Research, on a visit to ʻIolani Palace. After you watch the report, find more information below about health disparities among African-Americans and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders.



The Numbers

African Americans:

The Centers for Disease Control reports that 22% of adult African-American males smoke; 37.6% of African-American men and 56.9% of African-American women struggle with obesity. Hypertension is measured among 40.9% of African-American men and 44.8% of African-American women. (Source: CDC Fast Statistics, health survey by ethnicity)

Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders have higher rates of smoking, alcohol consumption, and obesity. This group also has little access to cancer prevention and control programs. Some leading causes of death among Native Hawaiians/Pacific Islanders include: cancer, heart disease, unintentional injuries (accidents), stroke and diabetes. Some other health conditions and risk factors that are prevalent among Native Hawaiians/Pacific Islanders are hepatitis B, HIV/AIDS, and tuberculosis.

Health research at JABSOM

Addressing health disparities is an over-arching research theme at the University of Hawaii (UH) medical school. Here are some of the projects at the UH John A. Burns School of Medicine that received funds from NHLBI in 2016:

Alika Maunakea – K01 – Identifying Epigenetic Biomarkers of Cardiovascular Disease Risk in Humans
Ralph Shohet – T32 Training in Cardiovascular Research at the University of Hawaii
May Okihiro – U34 Enhancing Care Coordination and Capacity Across Community Sectors to Improve Asthma Outcomes in High Risk Children in Hawaii
Keaweʻaimoku Kaholokula – R01 The KAHOLO project preventing cardiovascular disease in Native Hawaiians

Watch the NHLBI report about how Dr. Gibbons incorporates exercise into his routine

Read more about Dr. Gibbons

Gary Gibbons, MD provides global leadership for research, training, and education programs to promote the prevention and treatment of heart, lung, and blood diseases and enhance the health of all individuals so that they can live longer and more fulfilling lives.

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