



American Psychiatric Association to Spotlight Symposium on 'Hot Topics in Afro-American Mental Health'

This year the American Psychiatric Association will spotlight several sensitive issues facing the African American community, at its annual meeting in New Orleans, Louisiana, May 22-26. Leading the team is David W. Smith, M.D., Addiction Psychiatrist with the Center for AIDS Research, Education and Services in Sacramento, California.

New Orleans, LA (PRWEB) March 10, 2010 -- Dr. Smith and his team will present challenges in treating blacks in mental health, HIV and other taboo topics including, HIV and African American men 'on the down low.' The Center for Disease Control defines the phrase, 'on the down low' or 'on the DL,' as the 'behavior of men who have sex with other men as well as women and who do not identify as gay or bisexual.' The risks associated with this activity present widespread challenges for HIV prevention professionals. The stigma of homosexuality and the secretive nature of this problem results in a number of women showing up in clinics around the country diagnosed with HIV.

In the general population, "there is an alarming over-representation of Afro-Americans in the United States living with HIV and a large number have critical mental health needs as well," says Dr. Smith. Mental health concerns in African Americans are supported by the frequently misdiagnosis for schizophrenia rather than a more accurate diagnosis of bipolar disorder or other affective disorders in non-HIV patients.

William Lawson, M.D., Ph.D., DFAPA, Professor and Chairman of the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Howard University College of Medicine and Hospital, Washington, D.C., will address the unique psychopharmacological findings in the black community. One of the common challenges in treating and identifying mental disorders, according to Dr. Lawson is the 'lack of research participation by African American patients and investigators in treatment development.' Patients are suspicious and providers fail to engage the patient in discussions of these problems.

There is a glaring deficit in the use of mental health services by African Americans in the United States. According to a 1999 Surgeon General's Report:

- Overall, only one-third of Americans with mental illness or a mental health problem get care. Yet, the percentage of African Americans receiving needed care is only half that of non-Hispanic whites. One study reported that nearly 60% of older African American adults were not receiving needed services.
- Nearly 1 in 4 African Americans is uninsured, compared to 16% of the U.S. population. Rates of employer-based health coverage are just over 50% for employed African Americans, compared to over 70% for employed non-Hispanic whites. Medicaid covers nearly 21% of African Americans.

Another expert presenter on the team, Janet Taylor, M.D., Clinical Instructor of Psychiatry at Columbia University affiliated Harlem Hospital in New York, and frequent contributor to CBS "The Early Show," and NBC "The Today Show." Dr. Taylor will discuss Women's Mental Health issues. African American women are least likely of all subgroups to seek help in mental health issues. Their reasons may include; lack of insurance, mistrust of the medical community

or reliance on family and religious support instead of seeking medical help. As a contributor to O, the Oprah Magazine, Dr. Taylor's involvement from a grassroots effort is where she makes the most impact in the community. "Being on the frontline with individuals and their families battling the emotional and economic impact of mental illness is where I can make a difference," says Dr. Taylor.

Harriet Washington, award-winning bioethics journalist and author of "Medical Apartheid," will discuss the Impact of Past and Current Prejudices. In her book, Washington dissects the dark history of medical experimentation on African Americans from colonial times to the present. She discusses the past and present ethical issues in the treatment of individuals suffering from mental illness and chemical dependency in America. Medical Apartheid clearly paints a vivid, yet disturbing, picture of why African Americans have an innate mistrust of the medical establishment. Washington chronicles the history of African Americans being used as human guinea pigs in experiments from, Thomas Jefferson exposing hundreds of slaves to an untried smallpox vaccine before using it on whites, to the infamous Tuskegee Syphilis Study, in which black syphilitic men were observed, but not treated in order to document the long term effects of the disease.

Although most of the symposium will focus on African American mental health issues, a segment headed by Zack Cernovsky, Ph.D., professor of psychology at the University of Western Ontario, Canada, will discuss the issues from a Canadian perspective. Dr. Cernovsky will describe the attempt of the current head of the infamous Pioneer Fund, J.P. Rushton, to influence physicians and psychiatrists, to believe in the genetic inferiority of blacks. The Pioneer Fund is a non-profit organization, established in 1937, to advance the scientific study of heredity and human differences. Scientific scrutiny shows that Rushton's methodology (e.g., measuring head circumference by tape as a substitute for IQ tests) and his generalizations from inadequate samples discredit his work. According to Cernovsky, "his books have probably misled at least some physicians." These physicians may resort to discriminatory practices in their clinical decisions about black patients.

Mental health professionals and psychiatrists are uniquely positioned to assist patients in improving mental and physical health. The overall goal of the symposium is to provide a better understanding and awareness of the inimitable challenges in treating the African American mental health patient.

For information or the availability of any the above speakers, please contact Rhonda Daley, Pacificus Marketing Group, LLC at (707) 812-4380. For a fact sheet pertaining to this release, please visit: <http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/cre/fact1.asp>.

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