

Black men: Here's your wake-up call

Written by Anton J. Gunn
Friday, 22 March 2013 09:27 -



Have you received a wake-up call yet?

For too many of us, it takes a sudden wake-up call — in the form of a major or minor health crisis — to make us realize that we're not invincible. And tragically, for some, that call comes too late.

As black men, we often don't talk about our health or seek help until something goes wrong. We may exercise and eat right. We may know how our habits today affect how we feel. But what about tomorrow? Are we making the right choices to stay healthy as we grow older? Most importantly, are we having the right conversations about health and well-being with our sons and our fathers, with our brothers, our colleagues, our neighbors, and our friends?

According to the Office of Minority Health at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, black men are 30 percent more likely to die from heart disease and 60 percent more likely to die from a stroke than white men. And unfortunately, the list goes on — black men still suffer from higher rates of disease and chronic illness such as prostate cancer, diabetes and heart disease.

Unless we act now, these disparities will continue to affect generations to come. Their existence should be a wake-up call for all black men. It's time to invest not only in our own health, but in the health of our communities.

That starts by putting ourselves in the driver's seat when it comes to our own care. The health

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care law signed by President Obama in 2010 is removing many of the obstacles to health care we've faced in the past. It provides access to preventive services – like screenings for blood pressure, cholesterol, and type 2 diabetes – at no cost to us.

It will protect those of us with pre-existing conditions like asthma or heart disease from unfair premium rates or outright denial of coverage. It makes major investments in America's network of community health centers, where over a quarter of patients served are African-American. And on October 1st, the law will open the door to affordable coverage for millions of African-Americans, through the Health Insurance Marketplace.

That means brothers running their own businesses will have the opportunity to get coverage for themselves, their employees, and their families. That means men working in barber shops, body shops, and construction companies across America will have access to affordable coverage if they don't have it now. That means when you hit a rough spot and are between jobs, you don't have to sacrifice the well-being of your loved ones. It means greater peace of mind and financial security for our families and communities.

There's a lot of great work being done in our community to close gaps in access to quality care. I'm encouraged by the tireless work that our faith- and community-based groups are doing every day to raise awareness and push policies that will make the health care system work for all Americans. They are leading the way – but it's up to all of us to do our part.

The wake-up call that brings better health to our communities shouldn't be a private alarm that we hear alone. It should be a chorus of voices that speaks to us, our families and our communities. This year, let's put our health in our own hands, and create a brighter, more secure future together for all of us.

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