Brief summaries of the latest clinical findings

AMERICAN INDIAN HEALTH

American Indians Die Prematurely

American Indians have the highest mortality rates in the nation, and American Indians in South Dakota have the highest of all, according to a study conducted by researchers from the South Dakota Department of Health in Pierre, South Dakota. The study, although of just 1 state, underscores a serious public health issue: 70% of American Indians die before the age of 70 years.

The researchers note that although mortality rates vary widely among American Indians throughout the country, substantial underreporting or misclassification of race have resulted in artificially low mortality rates for some areas and contributed to a "wide misunderstanding" about American Indian mortality and health.

Using death certificate data from 2000 to 2010, the researchers calculated age-specific mortality rates for 5,738 American Indians and 70,580 whites and looked for patterns. For the 10 leading causes of death—heart disease, unintentional injury, cancer, diabetes, liver disease, suicide, respiratory disease, stroke, influenza/pneumonia, and homicide—the age-adjusted mortality rates of American Indians were all higher than those for whites.

High age-specific death rates among children and adolescents were largely due to unintentional injuries, suicides, and homicides. Higher rates for those 3 categories combined continued through ages 40 to 49 years. Breaking down those 3 categories revealed more critical data. For instance, death by unintentional injuries was 6 times higher, and homicide was 22 times higher among American Indians aged 30 to 39 years than that in whites. Suicide among children and adolescents aged 10 to 19 years was nearly 6 times higher than the rate for white teens.

The risk factors are not new: Alcohol abuse, diabetes, and smoking have long been documented among the American Indian population. But the consequences are drastic: 40% of chronic liver disease in South Dakota, for instance, occurs among American Indians. Diabetes-related death is 10 times higher among American Indians aged 50 to 69 years, compared with whites. The distribution of heart disease, stroke, and cancer is disproportionately higher in the white population, because fewer American Indians live to an age when chronic diseases are the most common causes of death, the researchers say. In 2010, the median age of death for whites was 81 years; for American Indians, 58 years.

The study helps expand knowledge about American Indian health by providing a comprehensive picture of the causes of premature death. It uncovers a need to improve health overall, the researchers say, rather than a single primary disease, injury, or risk factor. The researchers cite, for instance, the fact that South Dakota's largest reservation is "dry," with laws prohibiting possession or consumption of alcohol on reservation land, but in bordering communities, alcohol is easy to come by. One neighboring community with a population of only 62 has 4 beer stores that sold the equivalent of 12,603 cans of beer (12-ounce) a day in 2009.

Every policy that affects American Indian health thus should be guided by an approach that emphasizes the practice of "health in all," the researchers urge. That means the decision making should take into account economics, housing, labor, education, business, culture, transportation, land use, the justice system, and health care. "Incorporating health in all policy decisions can improve the environment for American Indians," they note, "as well as individuals' decisions about healthy behaviors and lifestyle choices." ●