Take Action, Get Tested

Debra Y. Fraser-Howze, the senior vice president of Government and External Affairs at OraSure Technologies, Inc., stresses that the HIV and AIDS epidemic in the Black community is far from over and continues to be a major challenge that must be faced on a daily basis.

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The spread of HIV/AIDS is not a problem that can be wished away, and so we must do everything in our power to confront it in an effort to overcome it. This epidemic must be taken seriously.

According to the CDC, both African American men and women are more likely than any other races and ethnicities to be diagnosed and affected by HIV, and men accounted for 70% (14,700) of the estimated 20,900 new HIV infections among all adult and adolescent African Americans in 2010. For women, the rate of new HIV infections was 20 times that of white women and 5 times that of Hispanic women in the same year.

In an effort to change these staggering statistics, we must unite to increase awareness and engage in discussions around the importance of testing and knowing your status. Each year, February 7th presents us with a day to not only raise awareness, but also open a dialogue around how this deadly disease continues to disproportionately affect the African American community. In 2012, African Americans had the largest percentage (47%) of the estimated 47,989 diagnoses of HIV infection in the United States (CDC).

National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day (NBHAAD) puts forth a mission to build awareness through four focus areas – education about the disease, involvement in communities to aid in prevention, testing, and treatment. We all have the ability to take action and involve ourselves to make a difference in the war against HIV/AIDS.

The Importance of Testing

The clearest action people can take in this fight is to get tested regularly. If everybody were to know their HIV status, we would place ourselves in a much better position to reduce the staggering numbers around new HIV infection in our community.

The opportunities to get tested for HIV are now better than ever before. The CDC recommends annual HIV testing and for those who engage in high-risk behaviors, testing should be conducted more frequently. An individual can be tested by a healthcare professional, and now, there is an over-the-counter test available for testing in the privacy of one’s home.

The OraQuick® In-Home HIV Test makes testing extremely easy and is the first and only test of its kind. The simple, non-invasive, oral swab is provides results in just 20 minutes and is based on the same HIV test that is used in professional healthcare settings. It is available for purchase in most national drug store chains or at OraQuick.com. Testing for other diseases associated with HIV is equally as important, given that hepatitis C (HCV) is one of the leading causes of death for those infected with HIV. Those who test positive for HIV should ensure that they are tested for HCV as well.

Honest Conversations

It is critical that we, as a community, remain vigilant in the war against HIV/AIDS, and continue to engage in open and honest dialogue with one another. Conversations with sexual partners are particularly important. The power of knowing your status before you engage in a relationship is one of the biggest weapons in this fight. The CDC states that most black women are infected with HIV through heterosexual sex (87 percent), so having the conversation, encouraging your partner to get tested and taking the necessary precautions is absolutely critical.

We have the power to overcome these statistics. Increasing awareness, opening conversations around education and testing, will contribute to the fight against this ongoing health epidemic in our community.

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Prior to joining OraSure Technologies, Ms. Fraser-Howze served as the President/CEO of the National Black Leadership Commission on AIDS (NBLCA), an organization she founded in 1987. NBLCA's mission is to educate, mobilize, and empower black leaders to meet the challenge of fighting HIV/AIDS and other health disparities in their local communities. Working with a broad spectrum of community leaders, including clergy, public officials, medical practitioners, and those in business, civic, social policy, and the media, NBLCA achieves its mission through capacity-building training; technical assistance; education; policy and advocacy; screening, testing, and referrals; research and evaluation; resource development; and leadership development.

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