

Research Report

UTHSC Wins \$1.3 Million Grant

Investigators to Study Health Disparities Research

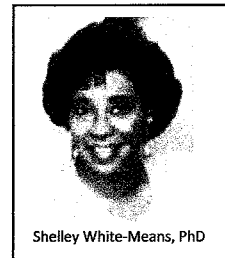
By LYNNE JETER

A team of investigators at the University of Tennessee Health Science Center (UTHSC) will examine health disparities in connection to race and other social determinants of health in Memphis and Shelby County, thanks to a \$1.3 million grant from the National Center on Minority Health and Health Disparities (NCMHD), a component of the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

The NIH has made it a priority to focus research dollars on the differences in the burden of diseases, morbidity, mortality rates, and other adverse health outcomes affecting specific populations.

The research will be funneled through the Consortium for Health Education, Economic Empowerment and Research (CHEER), a UTHSC-led collaborative initiative conducting exploratory health disparities research. CHEER partners include UTHSC, Memphis and Shelby County health departments, Memphis Housing Authority, LeMoyné-Owen College, and First Baptist Church Lauderdale, with its independent affiliate, Mustard Seed, Inc., a non-profit organization seeking to improve the livelihood of citizens.

“In our city and state, minorities perform far worse than others when diagnosed with diabetes, heart disease, stroke, obesity, HIV/AIDS and other health issues,” said Shelley White-Means, PhD, a health economics professor at UTHSC and founder of CHEER. She has more than 25 years of research emphasis on health disparities among minorities, women, the elderly and other vulnerable populations. “The Institute of Medicine and other healthcare organizations are now discussing that stress, racism and social factors not typically associated with health frequently influence health outcomes. We’re grateful to NCMHD for the grant and eager to begin designing interventions.”



Shelley White-Means, PhD

CHEER’s four-tier mission involves:

- Conducting demographic research on health outcomes;
- Designing interventions for reducing or eliminating disparities;
- Developing opportunities for healthcare providers and community leaders to collaborate; and
- Assisting healthcare and community leaders in distributing information on health disparities and related interventions.

To examine health conditions in particular populations, CHEER will perform analyses in assigned zip codes and produce geographic information systems maps illustrating the health and demographic data.

“The NCMHD grant will increase the CHEER research component, moving it closer to becoming a comprehensive center of excellence on health disparities, engaging in extensive research, collaborations, training and administration,” said Kennard Brown, JD, MPA, PhD, executive vice chancellor and chief of staff for UTHSC. “Our research infrastructure will assist CHEER through numerous studies in progress related to minority health—cancer, diabetes, hypertension, obesity and HIV/AIDS are only a few of the projects.”

Even though UTHSC hopes to become a leading resource on health disparities with institutions, such as the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and the Morehouse School of Medicine, the university will not lose sight of the main goal: to reduce or eliminate gaps in health outcomes, both locally and beyond, said Brown.

Initially, the NCMHD grant will be used to study health disparities in the 38126 zip code, an area with a population of 8,104 (98 percent are African-American). The area ranks among the highest in Memphis and Shelby County in hospitalization rates for chronic disease, sexually transmitted diseases and crime. The zip code also has the lowest median income and education levels of any part of the city (60 percent live below poverty level; 45 percent have a high school diploma or some college; and only 4.5 percent have a bachelor's degree or higher).

CHEER will use written surveys to collect data from the 38126 citizenry. Factors impacting health will be analyzed, such as environmental exposure, genetics, healthcare access and behavioral lifestyles that reflect eating and cooking habits, sleep practices, exercise patterns and racial polarization. Also, social circumstances will be examined concerning employment conditions, housing environments, healthcare infrastructure, educational levels and experiences with racism. Specific questions will center on where they are employed, the number of persons living in a household, the quality of their housing, access to food stores carrying fresh produce, hot water access and other factors that influence health. First Baptist Church Lauderdale, a CHEER partner, is one of more than 20 churches in the 38126 zip code and will be instrumental in leading the ministerial effort to gather information.

In 2010, CHEER will conduct a community health summit to examine disturbing statistics, such as why African-Americans in Tennessee are 1.5 times more likely to die of heart disease than Caucasians, and why the state's African-American women are 12 times more likely to die from HIV/AIDS than its Caucasian females. Other disparities for Memphis that will be addressed include the rate of heart disease (27.6 percent, compared to 6 percent in the United States); the diabetes rate (11.5 percent, as opposed to 6 percent nationally); and why Memphis ranks first in the nation in obesity. Even though the \$1.3 million NCMHD grant covers two years, White-Means plans to apply for a 5-year funding period.

For more information about CHEER, visit www.uthsc.edu/CHEER