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**Critical Coverage: A New National Survey on Blacks, Media & Health**

**AFRICAN AMERICANS VOICE CONCERNS:**

**MAJORITIES SAY MEDIA PERPETUATES STEREOTYPES  
WHILE NOT FOCUSING ENOUGH ON HEALTH ISSUES THAT CONCERN THEM**

**Many Also Say They Are Skeptical of the Health Information They Get from the Media**

WASHINGTON, DC – African Americans report they get most of their health information from television with other media playing an important role, but they also say they are skeptical of what they read and hear. Overall, they think the media is doing a poor job reporting on the health issues affecting Blacks, and say coverage of social and health problems perpetuates negative stereotypes of Blacks. These are among the findings from a new national survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation and the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ).

More people say they received information in the last year about health care from television (57% a lot; 21% some) than from their doctors or other health providers (46% a lot; 21% some). Newspapers rank a close third (40% a lot; 24% some), with magazines (33% a lot; 24% some) and radio (24% a lot; 23% some) not far behind. Yet, most African Americans say they do not usually trust the health information they get from the general media (49% “only sometimes;” 7% “hardly ever”); about the same level of distrust as is expressed about information from the government (42% trust “only sometimes;” 13% “hardly ever”).

Seven out of ten African Americans (69%) say there are *not enough stories* about the health and medical conditions that most concern Blacks. They also say the media *under-represents* African Americans in health stories (76%), while *over-representing* them in crime coverage (76%). The main reason for the lack of focus on how health issues affect Blacks, say African Americans, is that “most news organizations are not aware of – or interested in – the health problems of Blacks” (64% say this is a reason); followed by limited health research on African Americans (58%) and too few Black journalists reporting on health care (56%).

Majorities also say the media “unfairly” stereotypes African Americans, by reporting on such issues as welfare dependency (70%), births to single mothers (61%), and teenage pregnancy (55%) as “Black problems.” Half of white Americans agree the media’s coverage of welfare is “unfair” to Blacks, Latinos, and other minorities, but Whites are less likely than Blacks to see fault with the media’s portrayal of minorities in reporting on other health and social problems.

This survey was conducted jointly by the Foundation and the NABJ for presentation at the NABJ’s annual conference being held this week in Washington, DC. Journalists and health experts – including Dr. David Satcher, U.S. Surgeon General; Julia Scott, National Black Women’s Health Project; Dr. Ian Smith, health reporter, NBC News; George Strait, medical correspondent, ABC News; and Linda Villarosa, a health and science editor, New York Times – will discuss the survey findings during a symposium on the coverage of health issues affecting African Americans at the

Washington Convention Center beginning at noon on Friday, July 31<sup>st</sup>. (Press must be cleared in advance by the NABJ press office to attend this session.)

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"Given the serious health problems that have historically plagued our community--from a high infant mortality rate to disproportionate cancer deaths to the spread of AIDS--this report sends an urgent message to the news media to focus more attention on these critical issues for African Americans. Further, the suggestion that most African Americans remain distrustful of the news media and are turned off by the negative portrayals of black people points to the need for news managers to step up efforts to develop staffs and products that more accurately reflect this increasingly multicultural society," said Vanessa Williams, President, National Association of Black Journalists.

While African Americans may have concerns about the way the media reports on health issues, specifically those that most affect them, many say this coverage has none-the-less influenced their lives in significant ways:

- 71 percent say they talked with a family member or friend about a health issue reported on in the media;
- 55 percent say they changed their own behavior to improve their health;
- 49 percent say they talked with a sexual partner about a sexual health issue; and
- 43 percent say they talked with a health provider.

"How and which health issues are covered – or not covered – can have an impact on people's lives," said Drew E. Altman, Ph.D., President, Kaiser Family Foundation. "The media matters to people's health."

Many African Americans give the media low marks for coverage of the health issues affecting Blacks in this country: 48 percent say the media does a "bad job;" 31 percent "good job;" and 18 percent are mixed. The media gets more credit, however, from African Americans for telling them and their family what *they* personally need to know about health and health care: 54 percent say the media does a "good job;" 27 percent "bad job;" and 18 percent are mixed. African Americans give better grades on both counts to the media that is more directly oriented to black audiences.

Still, many say *all* media could be doing more on health issues from changes in policy (71%) to how to talk with children about sex and other topics (63%) to HIV prevention (50%). Drug abuse and alcoholism (90% major problem; 6% minor problem) and teen pregnancy (89% major; 8% minor), rate with major diseases like heart disease (86% major; 10% minor), AIDS (81% major; 11% minor) and cancer (78% major; 17% minor), as among the top health problems cited by respondents as facing Black Americans today. Access to affordable health care and insurance (78% major; 12% minor), including Medicaid and Medicare (75% major; 15% minor) also are of significant concern.

### **Methodology**

The *Kaiser Family Foundation/National Association of Black Journalists 1998 National Survey on Blacks, Media & Health* is a random-sample telephone survey of 804 African American adults 18 and older nationwide. It was designed and analyzed by staff at the Foundation, NABJ, and Princeton Survey Research Associates (PSRA), and conducted by PSRA between June 9-July 2 1998. The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 4 percent. An 875-person companion survey of the general population was also conducted at the same time as the survey of African Americans. The margin of sampling error for this sample is plus or minus 4 percent. The findings about white Americans reported on here are from that survey.

The Kaiser Family Foundation, based in Menlo Park, California, is an independent national health care philanthropy and is not associated with Kaiser Permanente or Kaiser Industries.

The National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ), established in 1975, is the world's largest organization of journalists of color and represents journalists, students, and media-related professionals. It provides educational, career development, and support to black journalists worldwide. More information about the NABJ can be found on the association's website, [www.nabj.org](http://www.nabj.org).

The questionnaire and top line from the survey are available by calling the Kaiser Family Foundation's publication request line at 1-800-656-4533 (Ask for documents #1421). This release is also available on the Kaiser Family Foundation website at [www.kff.org](http://www.kff.org).