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Letter to the Editor | You Only Have One Heart

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A doctor uses a stethoscope on a senior patient at home. By. GETTY IMAGES

Dear Editor,

During my freshman year in college, my mother called and asked if I was sitting down. I said "Yes". She proceeded to tell me that my father had a massive stroke which left him partially paralyzed and he was not doing well. He was a relatively young man in his 40's. I had recently celebrated my 18th birthday but didn't know how to process this news. I heard the word "stroke" before but had no clue how it actually affected the person or families. What I did know, was that a stroke did not sound like anything good. So, I made it a point to learn.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), a stroke, sometimes called a brain attack, occurs when something blocks blood supply to part of the brain or when a blood

vessel in the brain bursts. In either case, parts of the brain become damaged or dies. A stroke can cause lasting damage, long-term disability, or even death.

Years later, my maternal aunt had a stroke. She immediately transformed from a vibrant, active woman, full of energy, conversation and independence to a person needing constant assistance and whose ability to speak was snatched away.

On that day, I learned another valuable life lesson: He who feels it, knows it! What does this mean? It means that until this type of event hits your household or becomes up close, personal, and intimate, few of us ever take notice of the fact cardiovascular diseases are silent killers. For several decades, heart disease has been the leading cause of death among Americans, with an increasingly high number of heart failure and stroke cases occurring among African Americans in their 20s, 30s and 40s. Every year about 1.5 million Americans suffer heart attacks or strokes, in many instances resulting in premature death.

According to a 2017 publication on health risk factors in the Caribbean and Latin America by the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), cardiovascular diseases, including stroke, are the leading causes of death in the region. It further states that raised blood pressure, commonly known as hypertension, continues to have a negative impact on morbidity and on the development of cardiovascular diseases. Uncontrolled raised blood pressure and/or hypertension can cause stroke, myocardial infarction, cardiac failure, dementia, renal failure, and blindness.

Throughout the U.S. Virgin Islands, the situation is remarkably similar. In a 2012 study on health disparities conducted by the University of the Virgin Islands Caribbean Exploratory Research Center (UVICERC), it is reported that cardiovascular diseases are the leading causes of death in the U.S. Virgin Islands, accounting for approximately 34% of all deaths. Furthermore, although risk factors for cardiovascular diseases widespread, most of the major risk factors are modifiable and entirely preventable. These include tobacco use, poor or high sodium diets, harmful use of alcohol, insufficient physical activity, high blood pressure, high blood sugar, obesity, and high blood cholesterol. Reducing these risks is critical to good heart health, especially during this period of the COVID-19 when underlying health condition such as hypertension and diabetes increases one's vulnerability.

Tips to reducing these risk factors include (a) connecting with a primary care doctor for a risk assessment, (b) keeping blood pressure, blood sugar and blood cholesterol in normal ranges, (c) eating a healthy diet, (d) taking medication when required, (e) maintaining a physically active lifestyle, (f) quitting smoking and (g) managing stress. Doing these things may save your or a loved one's life or prevent premature disability.

Shining a spotlight on good heart health and good health, generally, is particularly significant during February. In addition to being Black History Month, it is American Heart Month and National Children's Dental Awareness Month.

For these reasons, I celebrate the Territory's health care workers, especially the frontline workers delivering care throughout this extraordinary COVID-19 crisis. Kudos to the outstanding staff of the Federally Qualified Health Centers (St. Thomas East End Medical Center Corporation and Frederiksted Health Care, Inc), VI Department of Health, Roy Lester Schneider Hospital and Juan F. Luis Hospital.

I also celebrate the lifelong contributions of other health care providers and scholars in the Virgin Islands who have dedicated decades to serving high risk and vulnerable communities, either through their research, health practice or both. While not all-encompassing, the following

noteworthy Virgin Islanders deserve special recognition and praise for their contributions: Alfred O. Heath, MD; Gloria Callwood, PhD RN; Noreen Michael, PhD.; Donna Christensen, MD; Roy L. Schneider, MD; Cora Christian, MD; Mavis Matthews, MD; Tomas Evangelista, MD; Barbara G. Douglas, MD; Audria Thomas, MD; Kab Kyun Kim, MD; Hae Young Pak, MD; Dante Galiber, MD; Leighmin Lu, MD; Lucien Moolenaar, DDS; Gerhart Sprauve, DDS; George Rosenberg, MD; Ruth Watson, MD and Sidney Comissiong, MD.

On a more personal note, I extend special kudos and acknowledgement to my sister, Dr. Marcella Nunez Smith, Associate Professor, Yale School of Medicine and COVID-19 Advisor to President Biden, for her work over the decades in addressing health disparities. Additionally, she established the Eastern Caribbean Health Outcomes Network (ECHORN), which for the past 13 years, has been studying risk factors associated with developing heart disease, cancer and diabetes in Trinidad & Tobago, Barbados, Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands. Her work has supported creative approaches to improving health outcomes associated with cardiovascular diseases.

When it is all said and done, you only have one heart. Take care of it and it takes care of you.

Submitted on Tuesday by: *Moletto A. Smith Jr., St. Thomas resident and executive director of the St. Thomas East End Medical Center Corporation*

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