

Church effort sharply increases first-time African-American blood donors

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A program at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis and St. Louis Children's Hospital designed to increase awareness about sickle cell disease and the importance of blood donations within the African-American faith community led to a 60 percent increase in first-time blood donations, a new study has found.

The program, called Sickle Cell Sabbath, was formally launched in 2003 by Michael R. DeBaun, M.D., professor of pediatrics at the School of Medicine and a sickle-cell disease specialist at St. Louis Children's Hospital. It is observed on Sundays from February (Black History Month) through June, in honor of Charles Drew, M.D., an African-American blood specialist whose pioneering work in blood collection, plasma processing and transfusion laid the foundation for modern blood banking. Its aim is to educate congregations of predominantly African-American churches about sickle cell disease and the benefit of blood and cord-blood donations and to make giving blood more convenient by encouraging church sponsorship of blood drives.

Results of the study are published in the advance online publication of the journal *Transfusion*.

Sickle cell disease is the most common genetic disease in African-Americans, affecting about one in 400 newborns. Patients with sickle cell disease have red blood cells that contain an abnormal type of hemoglobin that causes the normally round, flexible red blood cells to become stiff and sickle- or crescent-shaped. The sickle cells can't pass through tiny blood vessels, which can prevent blood from reaching some tissues and can result in tissue and organ damage, pain and stroke.

"Blood transfusions and bone marrow transplants have been shown to be effective treatments for sickle cell disease by replacing sickle cells with healthy red blood cells," DeBaun said. "African-American blood donors are more likely to have

more compatible red blood cell phenotypes for children with sickle cell disease."

Although African-Americans make up 13.5 percent of the population, they make up only 6.5 percent of the total blood-donor pool.

"Historically in African-American communities, churches are one of the lead community centers in the neighborhood and are the easiest way to reach people, especially first-time donors," said Michael Johnson, chaplain for the Sickle Cell Sabbath Program who also has sickle cell disease. "Most people at the churches didn't know the impact blood donorship has. Our education process increased the number of donors significantly. Once people understand the importance of giving blood, they become repeat donors."

The Sickle Cell Sabbath Program worked with 13 predominantly African-American churches in the St. Louis metropolitan area. Each church sponsored at least two blood drives between 2003-2006. A few weeks prior to each blood drive, medical and professional staff from the Sickle Cell Medical Treatment and Education Center at St. Louis Children's Hospital and from the Sickle Cell Sabbath Program, or a representative of the American Red Cross, or a parent of a child with sickle cell disease made a brief presentation to the congregation about the disease and the benefits of blood donation.

Of the nearly 700 donors who participated in the blood drives, 422, or 60 percent, were first-time donors. According to the American Red Cross, about 12.2 percent of blood donors are first-time blood donors in the St. Louis metropolitan area general community.

Source: Washington University School of Medicine

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