



RESEARCH/CLINICAL UPDATE

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Keyword: Nursing home study

SECTION: TREATMENTS-
POLICY AND DELIVERY

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NEW STUDY OF PEOPLE WITH MS IN NURSING HOMES FINDS SIGNIFICANT RACIAL DIFFERENCES

Summary: A new study comparing African American and white people with MS who were admitted to nursing homes found distinct differences between these groups:

- The authors analyzed data on 1,367 African Americans with MS and 9,294 whites with MS who were admitted to nursing homes from June 1998 through August 2001, using a database developed by the federal agency that administers Medicare and Medicaid.
- African Americans were significantly more disabled and cognitively impaired, yet tended to receive fewer medications and approximately the same amount of services from physical, occupational, speech, and mental health therapists.
- The differences observed in this study may be due to many variables. Further study is needed.
- This was the first national study to compare the nursing home experiences of African Americans and non-Hispanic whites with MS, and was funded by a Health Care Policy and Delivery Research Contract from the National MS Society.

Details: In a new study of African American and white (not of Hispanic origin) people with MS who were admitted to nursing homes, African Americans were significantly more disabled and cognitively impaired, yet tended to receive fewer medications and approximately the same amount of services from physical, occupational, speech, and mental health therapists. The authors note that many variables contribute to these differences, and much more research is needed to understand what these findings imply for the development of MS and its care in different races. Robert J. Buchanan, PhD (University of North Carolina at Charlotte) and colleagues report findings in the November issue of *Multiple Sclerosis* (Vol. 10, no. 6, pp. 660-667[8]). This study was funded by a Health Care Policy and Delivery Research Contract from the National MS Society.

Background: MS occurs less frequently in African Americans than in Caucasian Americans, but there appear to be other differences as well. A study comparing the clinical characteristics of MS between these groups – reported by Dr. Bruce Cree and colleagues (University of California, San Francisco) at the 2003 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Neurology – found that blacks tended to have a more aggressive course than whites, and are at higher risk for developing disability and for transitioning into the secondary-progressive form of MS.

The current study draws upon a wealth of data that Dr. Robert Buchanan has gathered in a comprehensive effort to analyze the care of nursing home residents with MS using the “Minimum Data Set,” a database developed by the Centers For Medicare & Medicaid Services (the federal agency that administers Medicare and Medicaid). This data set describes people in nearly all nursing homes in the country, providing detailed demographics, such as age, gender, and race, as well as information about care and services received.

The Study: Dr. Buchanan and colleagues analyzed data on 1,367 African Americans with MS and 9,294 whites (not of Hispanic origin) with MS who were admitted to nursing homes from June 1998 through August 2001. They looked at demographic information, as well as physical dependency and cognitive performance, among other factors, using data from clinical rating scales specific for these purposes.

The results show that blacks with MS were admitted to nursing homes at the average age of 51.1, compared with 57.0 for whites. Almost one-half of blacks with MS were 50 years or younger, compared with one-quarter of whites with MS.

African Americans were significantly more disabled. One out of four African Americans were totally physically dependent on others to complete activities of daily living (e.g., dressing, eating), compared with fewer than one in seven whites. Black nursing home residents were also twice as likely as whites to have at least moderately severe cognitive impairment.

The results also show significant differences in the use of treatments. White residents with MS tended to receive more medications, particularly anti-anxiety, anti-depressant and diuretic medications. Although blacks were more physically dependent, there were no significant racial differences in the use of therapies provided by physical, occupational, speech, and mental health therapists. Based on resident complaints and staff observations, black residents were more likely to have no pain, and white residents were more likely to experience at least moderate pain on a daily basis.

Conclusion: “This was the first national study to compare the nursing home experiences of African Americans and non-Hispanic whites with MS,” says Nicholas G. LaRocca, PhD, Director of Health Care Delivery and Policy Research at the National MS Society. “The investigators found that although African Americans were more physically and cognitively disabled than whites, African Americans did not receive higher levels of the various therapies offered in nursing homes. These results suggest that there may be a racial disparity in nursing homes in the use of MS-related care.”

The authors note that the differences observed in this study may be due to many variables such as an earlier age of onset, a more severe MS course, the presence of other illnesses (e.g., high blood pressure), and payment source. They conclude that further study is needed to comprehend racial differences in multiple sclerosis, as well as the possible effects of race on medical professionals who are diagnosing and treating the disease.

-- Research Programs Department