

1995_08

A COOPERATIVE AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE NATIONAL MEDICAL ASSOCIATION (NMA), AND THE U.S. ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY (EPA), TO PROMOTE RADON AWARENESS, TESTING AND MITIGATION IN THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY*

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ABSTRACT

The National Medical Association's Radon Education Program, through a cooperative agreement with the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency, is educating African-Americans to accept personal responsibility for preventing exposure to radon and health risks associated with radon.

**THE NATIONAL MEDICAL ASSOCIATION'S RADON EDUCATION PROGRAM,
INITIATED TO EDUCATE AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITIES**

The National Medical Association, founded in 1895, is a professional organization that represents 20,000 African-American physicians in the United States, including Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. The National Medical Association actively addresses all issues impacting the ability of its members to deliver quality health care.

The Radon Education Program was initiated with the National Medical Association because of its physician coalitions throughout the nation. The National Medical Association's physicians have extensive experience in delivering community-wide prevention and promoting activities which have the ability to reach many African-Americans. Unfortunately, most of whom are prime candidates for immediate and short-term environmental and life threatening ills which affect basic survival.

Moreover, radon is the second-leading cause of lung cancer deaths in the United States each year. African-Americans suffer from diseases of the lung, particularly lung cancer, at a disproportionate rate.

Lung and bronchus cancer is the leading cause of excess mortality in African-American men and the second-leading cause in African-American women. In addition, exposure to radon coupled with cigarette smoking increases the risks of developing lung cancer. This combination of risk factors is particularly significant because cigarette use is more prevalent among African Americans than Caucasians. Most recently, the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency expanded our cooperative agreement to include the Secondhand Smoke Awareness Program. This expanded cooperative agreement presents us an opportunity to further address and impact environmental ills that affect African-Americans.

Radon is a naturally occurring radioactive gas that is emitted from soil and accumulates indoors. Radium, which releases radon, is commonplace in the earth's crust. The radon gas seeps through porous soils under homes or buildings and enters through gaps and cracks in the foundation or insulation, pipes, walls or other openings.

An estimated 6 million homes in the United States may have indoor radon levels at or above the Federal government's recommended action levels. This equates to nearly one out of every 15 homes. Risk factors for developing lung cancer from radon depend mostly on how much radon is in your home, the amount of time spent in your home and whether you are a smoker or have ever smoked. Unfortunately, nationwide surveys have

indicated that the level of awareness of the risks presented by radon exposure is only 48% among African-Americans compared to 77% among Caucasians.

It is difficult to convince the African-American community of the dangers of radon because there is no physical evidence of the existence of radon gas; people cannot see or smell radon gas; people usually feel safe in their homes; and radon gas is just another health risk or environmental hazard among many that is a part of everyday life.

To help reduce the rates of lung cancer in African-Americans, the National Medical Association entered in a cooperative agreement in 1992 with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to promote radon awareness, testing and mitigation in African-American communities. Through our pilot program in Louisville, Kentucky, we have reached in one year, 25% of the African-American population through health fairs, frequent television and radio spots, verbal and visual presentations at local, state and national meetings, print material distribution and coalitions with community organizations.

Approximately, 4,000 radon fact sheets and 1,000 radon test kits were distributed during January 1993 - June 1994. Fifty percent of the distributed radon test kits have been utilized and test results returned to Louisville residents. Our pilot program had a Health Jamboree in Louisville in June 1994 with over 1,000 community members in attendance. This Jamboree was the result of partnerships with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the National Black Caucus of State Legislators, American Heart Association, Louisville Fire Prevention Bureau, St. Stephen Baptist church and many other organizations.

The target population in Louisville, Kentucky, was receptive to risk information about radon. Our pilot city coordinator, a well-known Pediatrician and community activist was recognizable to the target population. Beverly M. Gaines, M.D., was a frequent face and voice to African-Americans. Dr. Gaines appeared regularly on television talk shows and radio programs discussing various health risks. The community attended the health jamboree in large numbers and three out of four persons knew about radon from watching television and listening to the radio. The community was interested in learning more about radon and receiving test kits to test their homes. In this African-American community, people were familiar with the messenger and the message. The credibility of the messenger in the African-American community is very important. Historically, physicians, educators and religious leaders are well respected in our communities. Knowledge, attitude, practice and tradition plays a big part in the African-American community being receptive to health risk information.

The National Medical Association has been most effective in radon awareness in a coordinated community-based setting such as a health jamboree. This type of event brings schools, churches, physicians, businesses, civic organizations and Federal and local governments together to promote health awareness and disease prevention activities.

A component of our Radon Education Program consists of training and awarding mini grants to physicians, physician coordinators and community leaders so that the program can be implemented in their respective community. Recently, our program coordinator in Cleveland, Ohio participated in a health fair which reached over 6,000 community members. Health fairs have been an extremely successful method of reaching the African-American community. In fact, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has recommended that we continue reaching the target population through health fairs across the Country.

At a Radon Public/Private Partnership meeting in December 1993, the National Medical Association's Radon Education Program received an outstanding achievement award from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in recognition of leadership, dedication and contributions toward reducing the public health risk of indoor radon gas.

We are vigorously reaching out to our communities through participating in educational programs with schools, universities and churches. In addition, the Radon Education Program is being presented and exhibited at

national and state meetings and conventions. The Program staff is writing articles, abstracts and books to educate all segments of the African-American population. Several of our articles have appeared in national magazines. The staff presented a poster exhibit at the American Public Health Association's Convention. The National Medical Association is implementing the Radon Education Program on a national level and is expanding its outreach activities to promote environmental justice and equity.

* Permission has been granted by Elsevier Science to re-print this paper from *The Total Environment, Special Issue on the Natural Radiation Environment*, presented at the NRE VI International Symposium, June 5-9, 1995, Montreal, Canada, to be published in 1996.