

Summary of the Capitol Hill Breakfast Briefing on Women's Health and Chronic Illness

Sponsored By The Honorable Louis Stokes

March 12, 1997

FRIENDS of the NINR held the first of three Capitol Hill breakfast briefings this year, selecting as the topic the critical issue of chronic illness and its effects on women's health. FRIENDS, an independent, non-profit membership organization, supports the NINR by promoting public awareness of the role of nursing research in advancing health care practice in the United States. Those attending the briefing included Congressional members and staff and nursing researchers and administrators.

Welcoming remarks were provided by Congressman Louis Stokes (D-OH), who serves on the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies, the Committee that appropriates funds for the NIH. Congressman Stokes emphasized his support for the research programs of the NINR. He noted that Case Western Reserve University took time to orient him to the important work of nurse researchers early in his career and that he has been a strong advocate for their work. He also emphasized that Congress is taking increasing interest in women's health issues, and he recognized the important contributions of nurse researchers in improving women's health.

In her introductory remarks, FRIENDS President Colleen Conway-Welch, PhD, RN, FAAN, Dean of Vanderbilt University School of Nursing, thanked the Lilly Center for Women's Health at Eli Lilly and Company for hosting the event. She indicated that the topic of the briefing, Women's Health and Chronic Illness, is important to women of all ages. Researchers are finding that gender, age and ethnicity can strongly influence how women experience symptoms and respond to treatment. She also stated that as America's population ages, the need for long-term care will increase. Innovations through nursing research discoveries are particularly relevant.

National Institute of Nursing Research Director Patricia A. Grady, PhD, RN, FAAN, briefly described nursing research in the context of the Nation's health care system and its current and future needs. Dr. Grady emphasized that NINR-supported research activities, including basic research, are singularly patient-oriented and tackle questions that are at the heart of patients' and families' daily experiences with illness. A major goal is to ensure that knowledge about health-enhancing and life-saving therapies is translated into effective healthcare services and becomes an integral part of people's lives.

The moderator was May L. Wykle, PhD, FSGA, FAAN, Director of the Center on Aging and Health and Associate Dean of the Frances Payne Bolton School of Nursing, Louis Stokes Health Science Center, Case Western Reserve University. Dr. Wykle stated that chronic illness affects Americans of all ages. It is projected that by the year 2050, there will be 150 million Americans with chronic conditions. Nurse researchers can help reduce this number by continuing to improve quality of life. Recent studies show that nurses are the health care professionals most trusted by patients. It is this close tie to patients that allows nurse researchers to make the difference in the Nation's health.

THE RESEARCH

WOMENS HEALTH - KNOWING MORE ABOUT MENOPAUSAL TRANSITION, INSOMNIA AND SLEEP-RELATED ILLNESS.

Joan Shaver, PhD, RN, FAAN, Dean And Professor At The University Of Illinois-Chicago School Of Nursing.

Dr. Shaver pointed out that women comprise about half the U.S. population, are now our society's major wage earners, and frequently have children whose health is dependent on the health of their mothers. Research attention must therefore focus on preserving women's quality of life and ability to function effectively. Dr. Shaver's findings indicate that women report more sleep problems than men, with 25% of women in various stages of menopause indicating poor sleep or insomnia. She emphasized the importance of creating diagnostic categories for insomnia to determine whether physical or psychological causes predominate so that interventions, such as stress management or treatment of hot flashes, can be initiated. She is now studying sleep disturbances and fibromyalgia, a mysterious chronic illness affecting more than 10 million Americans, mainly women, to determine possible links to hormonal disturbances, and whether interventions involving sleep therapies, hormone augmentation, and stress management will help in managing the symptoms of fibromyalgia.

THE PROGRESSIVELY LOWERED STRESS THRESHOLD MODEL: EFFECTIVENESS FOR RURAL ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE AND RELATED DISORDERS CAREGIVERS.

Dr. Kathleen Buckwalter, PhD, RN, FAAN, Professor And Director Of The Center For Aging At The University Of Iowa College Of Nursing.

Dr. Buckwalter described her research that tests a Progressively Lowered Stress Threshold model designed to help rural caregivers in the home to manage the chronic behavioral problems of persons with Alzheimer's disease and related dementias. These disorders affect more than 4 million Americans, up to two-thirds of whom live at home. Furthermore, the present phenomenon of the elderly caring for the elderly is expected to increase. The model under study contains an educational component for patients and families about the disease process; techniques to simplify caregiving tasks and problem-solving strategies to use over the course of the illness; counseling and emotional support; and assistance with local resources and support networks. Dr. Buckwalter's central focus is on the caregiver, and she will assess the impact of the intervention on reduction of the burden of caregiving and improving quality of life.

CHALLENGES

Nursing research studies, such as those discussed at the briefing, are seeking solutions within the context of society's critical healthcare challenges, as is evidenced by the following statements and statistics:

- Chronic conditions are the leading cause of illness, disability, and death in the United States today.
- Chronic conditions cost the economy \$470 billion (in 1990 dollars) in direct medical costs in 1995, and more than \$230 billion in lost productivity.
- Almost 100 million people in the U.S. have one or more chronic conditions.
- Over 40 million people are limited in their daily activities by chronic conditions - and the numbers of people so affected are expected to increase dramatically in the coming decades.
- People are living longer with chronic conditions than ever before.
- In 1990, there were more than 4 million patients with Alzheimer's disease and related disorders.
- About 25% were 85 years old, and 8.5% were over 65 years of age.
- Family caregivers provide 2/3 of all home care services.
- About 25 million caregivers provide uncompensated care to chronically ill and disabled patients, at a market value of \$300 billion per year.