

Study finds African-Americans live longer in counties with more Black doctors

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Washington, June 3 (RHC)-- The Journal of the American Medical Association finds that Black people living in U.S. counties with more Black primary care physicians live longer, whether or not they are treated by those doctors.

Research has shown that when Black doctors treat Black patients, health outcomes are more positive, including in preventive care. Less than 6% of U.S. doctors are Black, around half the proportion of Black people in the U.S. population.

The study, published in JAMA Network Open, is the first to link a higher prevalence of Black doctors to longer life expectancy and lower mortality in Black populations. Other studies have shown that when Black patients are treated by Black doctors, they are more satisfied with their health care, more likely to have received the preventive care they needed in the past year, and are more likely to agree to recommended preventive care such as blood tests and flu shots. But none of that research has shown an impact on Black life expectancy.

The new study found that Black residents in counties with more Black physicians — whether or not they actually see those doctors — had lower mortality from all causes, and showed that these counties had lower disparities in mortality rates between Black and white residents. The finding of longer life expectancy persisted even in counties with a single Black physician.

“That a single Black physician in a county can have an impact on an entire population’s mortality, it’s stunningly overwhelming,” said Monica Peek, a primary care physician and health equity researcher at UChicago Medicine who wrote an editorial accompanying the new study. “It validates what people in health equity have been saying about all the ways Black physicians are important, but to see the impact at the population level is astonishing.”

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