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BU researcher receives grant to better understand breast cancer in African-American women

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Why do African-American women die at a higher rate and experience more aggressive breast tumors than white women? Researchers from Boston University's Slone Epidemiology Center (SEC) have received funding from the National Cancer Institute (NCI) to explore this question. The new grant is based on the premise that having a better understanding of the biology of breast cancer in African-American women will lead to better prevention and treatment.

"Identifying genetic variants related to breast cancer in African-American women will further our knowledge of the disease and may ultimately lead us to better treatments and opportunities for prevention," said Julie R. Palmer, ScD, senior epidemiologist at BU's SEC and professor of epidemiology at Boston University School of Public Health, who is leading the study at BU.

Breast cancer is not a single disease, but a combination of distinct disease subtypes, with varying risk factors and clinical outcomes. However, the reasons for differences in breast cancer biology and disparities in incidence and mortality rates between white and African-American women are not well understood, and existing studies have not been large enough to provide sufficient statistical power to elucidate genetic factors associated with how breast cancers develop. The size and power of this new study could help address the current lack of scientific understanding.

"Health disparities are a problem of great concern for the NCI and one that we are zeroing in on as evidenced by this grant," said acting director of the NCI, Douglas Lowy, M.D.

This study will seek to identify novel genes and gene pathways that influence breast cancer in African-American women.

This multicenter study will pool data, bio-specimens, and expertise from 18 previous studies of breast cancer among women of African ancestry. The investigators will determine whether genetic variants may be associated with increased risk. Specifically, they will examine:

- The association between genetic variants and the risk of estrogen receptor-negative breast cancer and estrogen receptor-positive breast cancers
- How genetic variants affect major breast cancer biological pathways and whether the effects may differ between African-American women and white women

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Source:
Boston University Medical Center
