

Stephanie Johnson discusses heart health as a priority for Black women

AMA's Moving Medicine video series amplifies physician voices and highlights developments and achievements throughout medicine.

Featured topic and speakers

In today's episode of Moving Medicine, AMA Chief Experience Officer Todd Unger talks with Stephanie Johnson, the AMA's vice president of communications and product strategies, about the AMA's ongoing efforts to encourage Black women in taking preventive action to protect their heart health and an important event happening this weekend that's an extension of that work.

Learn more on "Homecoming from the Heart" on Oct. 16 at 10 a.m. Eastern.

Speaker

- Stephanie Johnson, vice president, communications and product strategies, AMA

Transcript

Unger: Hello. This is the American Medical Association's Moving Medicine video and podcast. Today we're talking to Stephanie Johnson, the AMA's vice president of communications and product strategies in Chicago, about how the AMA's ongoing efforts to encourage black women in taking preventative action to protect their heart health and an important event about that topic that's happening this weekend. I'm Todd Unger, AMA's chief experience officer in Chicago.

Stephanie, let me just start with a statistic that I saw that just really blew me away and that's that 50% or more than 50% of black women over the age of 20 have high blood pressure. And nearly 80% of black adults who have high blood pressure don't have it under control. Those are pretty astounding statistics. Can you talk a little bit about what's driving this?

Johnson: Yes. Thank you. And thank you for bringing that statistic to the forefront. It is astounding when you hear, I mean, I have to just say it again, more than 50% of black women over the age of 20 have high blood pressure. And then you add that to the fact that 30% of Black Americans typically die or more likely to die from heart disease than non-Hispanic whites. And it is just astounding to be able to hear.

And it's a lot of factors, structural in nature, access to quality care, diversity in our physician workforce. We typically know that research shows us that patients, all patients, benefit from seeing diverse physicians, especially those in marginalized communities. So we are, at the AMA, are on a mission to be able to change that, to do whatever we can in terms of our resources and banding together with like-minded organizations to improve health outcomes when it comes to heart disease in Black communities, especially those numbers that you highlighted when it comes to black women.

Unger: So we have a huge job ahead of us there. So this problem has existed for some time—

Johnson: It has.

Unger: ... even before the pandemic. The refrain that I hear so many times is, "I have to believe the pandemic has probably made this worse." Is that the case or not?

Johnson: It is true. We are seeing many more of Black and Brown communities suffering from health outcomes, negative health outcomes associated with COVID-19 because of underlying conditions like heart disease, which is why it's a megaphone moment for people to pay attention, to understand what resources they have available for them in their communities, so that they are empowered to take action.

That's what the goal of the AMA and the organizations that we work with in this space are hoping to do, to ensure that vulnerable communities, marginalized communities know what's available to them in their local areas, so that they can do, take the necessary steps toward prevention because we know prevention happens outside of the clinical walls.

Unger: So we're going to talk a little bit more in detail about Release the Pressure and your messaging behind that campaign. A key part of that is around the fact you can do something about it. And it's about personal accountability and taking those measures to improve what is the significant problem and the significant risk. Can you talk about this issue around personal accountability?

Johnson: I can. And I'm going to get personal with you just for a moment. Last year, during the height of the pandemic, my family was hit with a double whammy. We lost my mother in March at the height of the pandemic due to congestive heart failure. It's something that she had been dealing with a long time and we slowly saw her health deteriorate.

I'm a part of a large family, so I had an older sister. She's the rock of our family, Anita. She would often help care for my mom. And a few weeks after my mom passed away from congestive heart failure, my older sister, the rock of our family, she died unexpectedly of a stroke. So it's personal in nature for me, the work that we get a chance to do, this sacred work at the AMA. And you named it, it's the Release the Pressure initiative.

And the goal of reach, or Release the Pressure, is basically to bring together organizations like-minded. We work with the American Heart Association, the National Medical Association, the Minority Health Institute, the AMA Foundation, the Association of Black Cardiologists, all pooling together our expertise, our resources, everything we can to make sure that we change these numbers in the right and positive direction. So we are taking off. We are doing everything that we can to ensure that we have better health outcomes associated with heart disease in Black communities. And this is just the beginning of the great work that we have on the horizon.

Unger: First of all, just let me say how sorry I am to hear about that, your own news. And I imagine that that does provide you with a really strong, as you said, your own personal commitment. This means a lot to you.

You have a really special event planned this weekend. AMA is participating in that, the Release the Pressure: Homecoming from the Heart event. Can you talk about what's happening this weekend?

Johnson: Yes. Exciting event happening in Atlanta. We are collaborating with Ebony, iHeartRadio, the Ad Council and Morehouse School of Medicine to create what, our own homecoming event. Homecoming season is upon us. Oftentimes, we describe homecoming in the Black community as the ultimate family reunion because we come together from all sectors and we celebrate our culture, dance and games. But this time we want to have a reckoning, if you will, around homecoming, a true conversation about personal accountability in health care and what you can do to be empowered to improve your heart health.

So we have a stellar lineup of physician experts, influencers that are supporters of our RTP movement that are going to be sharing tips and information, talking about free resources that individuals can access on the Release the Pressure website to be able to put themselves on a path to better heart health. And we're so excited about the collaboration and the partnership. And we know it's going to make an impact.

Unger: Stephanie, last question, for physicians that are in our audience, can you talk a little bit about the role that you see physicians playing in this effort? What can and should they be doing in this arena to address what is just a tremendous problem?

Johnson: Thank you, Todd. Great, great, great question. And you started it off in our early part of our conversation, diversity and workforce for physicians.

Johnson: Number one, we need more Black and Brown students going to medical school and being in a position to care for our growing diverse population. That's number one.

Number two, its partnership, when it comes to prevention. We know that there is a lot of personal accountability that has to happen for prevention. This is a change in the way that we've seen care typically happen for patients. You present with an episode of a condition and then a physician will care for that physician ... for that particular episode or condition that you have going on.

We are in a space now where we're talking about prevention. What can you do to partner with your patients to ensure they are taking the steps that they need to outside of the clinical walls to live healthier lives?

So one of the things that we're doing through releasethepressure.org is making ensure that we have a physician tool kit onsite that has a lot of resources in there about how to do teach-backs with your patients on properly measuring their blood pressure at home.

Monitoring is key. Research has shown that monitoring does help people pay attention to their numbers, know their numbers and know how to talk to their physicians about an appropriate course of treatment to make sure that they stay on a path to great heart health, so that is important.

Physicians are our partners and we want people to think about them that way. So physician champions, yay, go to our website, download our physician toolkit. That's what we want, physicians leading the way like they are the quarterback of the physician care team. And that's what we promote.

Unger: Well, thank you so much, Stephanie to you and all the team for the work that you're doing in this important arena. Good luck on the event this weekend. And again, for additional information on this event and the Release the Pressure initiative, go to releasethepressure.org.

Thanks for joining us today. We'll be back with another Moving Medicine video and podcast shortly. In the meantime, thank you and take care.

Disclaimer: The viewpoints expressed in this video are those of the participants and/or do not necessarily reflect the views and policies of the AMA.

?

