

Calabash health



Men, hair and sickle cell – barbers join health awareness campaign

By Iyamide Thomas, Regional Care Advisor, Sickle Cell Society, UK

A selection of barber shops in south London are taking part in an innovative health project where men as well as getting a haircut, are also being educated about their health. Barbershops very often create a hub in local communities and a setting where life stories are shared, problems are aired, advice is sought and of course football teams are discussed! These shops present a captive, grass roots male audience among which health messages can be promoted. The Sickle Cell Society in collaboration with the NHS Sickle Cell and Thalassaemia Screening Programme is now targeting barbershops to raise much needed awareness of sickle cell disease and screening among men. Sickle cell disease is a serious inherited blood condition that affects approximately 15,000 people in the UK, mainly from African and Caribbean communities. In addition to the individuals who have full blown sickle cell disease, an estimated 240,000 'healthy' people carry one copy of the sickle cell gene. For both men and women, knowing whether you carry the gene is extremely important as each time two carriers have a baby together, there is a 25% chance their child could inherit sickle cell disease, which can cause anaemia and extreme pain. To find out whether you are a carrier so that you can make informed decisions, you can request a special blood test from your GP.

Facts and Figures tell the story

Recent results released by the NHS Sickle Cell and Thalassaemia Screening Programme show that 1 in 7 of all newborn babies in the UK recorded as Black African origin is a carrier of

the sickle cell gene, whilst in Black Caribbean babies, 1 in 8 carry the gene. The gene is known to be more common in babies of West African origin, but in the study ethnic origin was not specifically broken down in this way. Of the 350 babies born annually in the UK with full blown sickle cell disease, 60% are of Black African origin. 1 in 800 babies described as 'White British' were also found to be carriers of a sickle cell gene.

Baby Drama

The NHS Sickle Cell & Thalassaemia Screening Programme have produced a short film called the 'Family Legacy' to raise awareness of sickle cell disease and testing. The Family Legacy is a moving British-Nigerian film about the impact the birth of a baby with sickle cell disease has on a marriage and a family. The Sickle Cell Society is now showing this entertaining and educational film at selected African and Caribbean barbershops (and hairdressers) around south London and following this with interesting question and answer sessions. The Family Legacy raises a lot of issues and it is amazing some of the views and beliefs men hold about sickle cell and their health! One key issue brought up in the film is the failure of some men to even contemplate that they might be carrying the gene for sickle cell. This was clearly revealed at one session when one man told me "You can tell I am AA just by looking at me". 'AA' describes a person's 'haemoglobin genotype' and means the person has no sickle gene that produces sickle haemoglobin. If someone has one copy of the sickle gene their genotype

is 'AS' and they are known as a 'carrier'. An individual with full blown sickle cell anemia has two copies of the gene and a genotype of 'SS'. The man who made the comment (incidentally nicknamed 'Firewood'!) had absolutely no idea what his genotype was but felt he was too strong and healthy looking to possibly be carrying a gene for sickle cell. How did I respond? "I have clients with full blown sickle cell disease who have more muscles than you"!

More than a Haircut

The health awareness sessions at the barbershops have been very interesting and successful. Shops visited so far are Sinto & Biggie, a Ghanaian barbers on Old Kent Rd, Merrygold and Big Choice Barbers, Nigerian shops in Camberwell and Peckham respectively and Better Cutz, a Caribbean barbers in Lewisham. These barbers are applauded for hosting these innovative health sessions. Educating men and raising awareness of testing is very important especially since 50% of fathers-to-be whose partners are carriers are turning down their invitations to be tested. The plan is to continue this innovative way of reaching out to men in other areas of London, thus ensuring that many more men get more than a haircut when next they visit their barbers!

Useful Websites:

www.sicklecellsociety.org
www.sickleandthal.org
www.familylegacy.org.uk