Older African-Americans with osteoarthritis of the knee preferred to avoid total knee replacement surgery


What are the preferences and expectations of older urban African-Americans regarding total knee replacement (TKR) for osteoarthritis (OA) of the knee?

**MAIN FINDINGS**

Preference for natural remedies. 36% of patients thought that OA was caused by cold or dampness, either to the joint or from the environment. They tended to think that OA was a natural, irremediable, inevitable deterioration and a sign of ageing. A strong trend toward an external locus of control of their illness was suggested: “I do not claim arthritis. God has not told me I have it. You have to claim it to have it.” Most respondents believed that their bodies should remain intact and that the body would give information regarding any need for treatment. They also stated that their bodies were not ready for surgery. Patients also spoke of keeping the knees warm, green alcohol, sliced potatoes, liniment, kerosene (paraffin), and various herbal creams and rubbing lotions.

Beliefs in God’s control. Patients objected to questions that asked them to choose situations that might increase their risk of death, stating that God controls the length of their lives. However, they did not cite belief in God’s control with regard to outcome of surgery. Patient or physician factors were cited more often as reasons for complications or unsuccessful surgical outcomes.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Older urban African-Americans with osteoarthritis of the knee preferred to continue in their current state, with use of natural remedies supported by beliefs in God’s control.

Commentary

In the study by Figaro et al., the authors attempt to understand why African-Americans are 2–3 times less likely than whites to have TKRs despite the higher prevalence of OA in African-Americans. The findings are important in understanding how decision making about treatment options is influenced by a process of reasoned action; that is, healthcare information is processed through an individual’s unique health belief system that is entrenched in cultural, experiential, and social factors. Figaro et al. found that African-Americans relied on non-surgical (natural) remedies and the power of God rather than on surgery for OA.

The ethnic disparity in the use of surgery for OA described by Figaro et al. is supported by other studies. Ibrahim et al. assessed the willingness of African-American and white patients to consider joint replacement and found that white patients were more willing to consider surgery if it was needed and recommended. Ang et al. found no ethnic differences in perceptions of pain and functional limitation between African-American and white patients with a similar severity of OA. 2 Additional studies explored ethnic differences in surgical options for conditions other than OA and found that African-Americans with cardiovascular disease had fewer cardiac revascularisations than whites.

The findings of Figaro et al. are limited by the purposive and convenience sampling of urban African-Americans recruited directly from churches or senior centres in a single area. It is important to remember, however, that purposive sampling in a qualitative study such as this provides for theoretical generalisation of findings. Other methods relying on random sampling might provide wider generalisability. The key theme identified by Figaro et al., “I don’t want to be cut,” signifies a cultural belief in body integrity and acceptance of degenerative joint change as part of ageing. The findings of this study will help nurses to understand the cultural frames of reference and related belief systems of patients that are integral to the provision of effective health education. Future work should build on current knowledge about ethnic differences and explore if culturally sensitive education can influence the attitudes and preferences of African-Americans about treatment options for OA and other medical conditions.

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