

HEALTH CARE AND THE NATIONAL DISEASE

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Archon Khephra Burns

Some epidemics are psychological in nature and are spread virally via diseased notions, ignorance and myths. *Koro*, the hysterical belief that men's penises are shrinking, periodically sweeps through Southern Asia, causing widespread panic and also some injury, inflicted mostly by those who are trying to help.

Koro appears to have hit the U.S. In Asia those who believe they've been

afflicted wear bamboo contraptions intended to keep their genitalia from disappearing while they sleep. In the technologically advanced U.S., Americans can avail themselves of male enhancement pills, pumps, patches and, yes, contraptions – mini racks that appear to be modeled on similar devices from the Inquisition but constructed of sturdy titanium, surgical steel and plastic. Nothing so primitive as bamboo.

The ads have come out from the backs of men's magazines to the full light of prime-time television. Viagra, Levitra and Cialis together already constitute a market of more than \$1.5 billion a year, and sales are expected to rise to more than \$6 billion over the next eight. Further, widespread concerns for performance have metastasized, causing flare ups of dormant fears about size. But thanks to a compassionate pharmaceutical industry, we now have Extenze and (for that raging dinosaur trapped inside the little lizard) Exeror.

What does all this have to do with the radical circumcision of defense spending for bigger missile systems, Smart cars and Scions replacing Cadillacs on our roads, identity theft, racism and health care reform? I'm just sayin'. Men whose identity and sense of self-worth are tied to the size of their portfolios and ability to perform between the balance sheets are now struggling to cope with the emotional impact of the recession. Stocks are down, hemlines are down, deposits and withdrawals are down, and I suspect that long-held suspicions, fears and fantasies about the source of black male swagger are up. The President of the United States, reputedly the most powerful man in the world, is black. The U.S. attorney general is black. The CEOs of American Express, Aetna, Delphi Corporation, Xerox Corporation and Darden Restaurants are all black. How did this happen? How is it that despite a 400-year beat down, something in black men is yet able to respond "and still I rise," while depression is sending others to pharmacy shelves for Abilify?

Some illnesses seem to persist for centuries, like a low-grade fever, only to flare up suddenly into madness and delirium. The backlash to the fact of an Obama Administration has been instructive in its vitriol and blatantly racist imagery and allusions. In America racism is the socio-economic equivalent of a national autoimmune disease, like arthritis, crippling the body politic, or like vitiligo, attacking melanocytes in an attempt to depigment the population. And it's a plague on both your houses.

Poor urban blacks have the highest mortality rates in the country, not because of drug overdoses or drive-bys, but chronic diseases. Black youths in Harlem, Detroit, the South Side of Chicago, Compton and Watts are less likely to reach age 65 than men in Bangladesh. It's as if the aging process is being accelerated by the myriad and chronic stresses attendant upon living while black in America. This constant exposure to stress hormones impairs the immune system, damages the brain and other organs and signals the body to accumulate abdominal fat around the waistline. Abdominal fat cells temporarily inhibit the brain from making the stress hormones that produce feelings of anxiety. And so the stress of poverty creates a biological urge to overeat, and the abundance, convenience and affordability of fast food, junk food and "comfort food" have made poor black people, as a group, the most obese in America. It accounts in part for the disproportionately high incidence among African Americans of high blood pressure, stroke, diabetes, kidney disease and certain types of cancer. And it costs us dearly. The bill for treating the nation's 11 million diabetics alone comes to \$92 billion for medications and doctors' visits and \$40 billion more in lost productivity due to absences from work and premature death.

Among those stresses shown to significantly weaken the body's line of defense against disease is the perception or feeling of a lack of control over one's environment. One Harvard researcher found that working-class African Americans who said they accepted unfair treatment as a fact of life had higher blood pressure than those who challenged it.

Is there any group in America that feels less in control or more vulnerable to the vicissitudes and disparities of our current healthcare system than poor African Americans?

Universal health care is but the first step toward recovering America's mental, physical, emotional and, yes, economic health. Ultimately, healing will require a holistic approach that takes into consideration remedies to the historic, chronic social conditions that continue to make us all sick. As with the individual, hope and a positive mental attitude on the part of the nation as a whole will help tremendously in ridding the body politic of disease and the widespread pain that accompanies it. Studies of the world's Blue Zones – those places where an extraordinarily high proportion of the natives live healthy lives past the age of 90 – find that a relentless optimism and a propensity for partying are key characteristics; that he who laughs lasts and also remains sexually active. Ω