Do African Americans in the Rural South Trust Generic Drugs?

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“No,” say Lister Hill scholar Monika Safford and colleagues. “Focus groups that were conducted for this qualitative study revealed several negative perceptions regarding generic drug use including the belief that generics are less potent than brand-name medications, require higher doses, and, therefore, result in more side effects. In addition, study participants expressed feelings of mistrust of providers, insurers, and pharmaceutical companies.”

The bioequivalence of generic and brand medications combined with substantially lower cost make increasing generic medication use, especially for people with chronic diseases, a health care priority. Although lower drug costs can help patients follow their treatment regimens exactly as prescribed, generic medications are underused. Previous studies show that disadvantaged people have low trust of generics and increased reluctance to switch to generics. This may be particularly relevant in the rural South, a region characterized by poverty, high rates of chronic disease and the highest stroke and coronary heart disease mortality in the United States.

To gain insight into beliefs held by residents of the rural Alabama Black Belt, focus group participants were recruited by community-based staff at a diabetes research program in two counties during 2011. Four focus groups were conducted with participants who were predominantly unemployed middle-aged women, one-fourth of whom were uninsured and more than half of whom had a high school education or less. Barriers to generic medication use included perceptions that generics are not “real” medicine; generics are for minor but not serious illnesses; the medical system cannot be trusted; and poor people are forced to “settle” for generics.

“Education about generics could rectify misinformation but overcoming views such as mistrust of the medical system and the sense of having to settle for generics because of poverty may be more challenging,” say the researchers. “Policy makers and providers should consider these perspectives when working to increase generic drug use in these populations.”

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