Social Determinants of Health: A Framework for Studying Cancer Health Disparities and Minority Participation in Research

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The theory of social determinants of health (SDH) posits that the health of people and communities is affected by social and economic factors (i.e., economic stability, education, neighborhood and built environment, health and health care, and social and community context). These interrelated constructs may negatively affect minority patients’ ability to participate in cancer research. Understanding SDH can help nurses address barriers to research participation, as well as design trials to improve minority patients’ cancer-related health.

Background

Individuals from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds are underrepresented in clinical trials and in cancer research studies (Siegel, Miller, & Jemal, 2015). With the need to provide evidence-based care and to conduct research that is generalizable, the underrepresentation of diverse groups in research compounds the difficulty of adequately understanding, addressing, and reversing health disparities. Data from 2015 indicate that the U.S. population is about 77% Caucasian alone, 13% African American alone, and 18% Hispanic or Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Therefore, a cancer research study reflecting population-based statistics would include at least 23% non-Caucasian participants. This percentage is rarely achieved.

An organizing framework or theoretical model can be particularly useful for framing, understanding, and addressing the complex issues involved in low research participation rates. The Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (ODPHP) maintains a website, www.healthypeople.gov, which outlines broad health goals and objectives that are part of the federal Healthy People 2020 initiative. The elimination of health disparities is an overarching goal of this initiative. Healthy People 2020 uses social determinants of health (SDH) as its organizing framework for understanding disparities (ODPHP, n.d.). In this article, the authors examine the SDH framework as presented in Healthy People 2020 as a mechanism for understanding disparities and, importantly, assessing and addressing gaps in minority participation in cancer research studies.

Social Determinants of Health Framework

The SDH framework posits that the health of people and communities is affected by social and economic conditions. These same conditions can negatively influence an