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BUCKS COUNTY  
**Courier Times**

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**HEALTH**

**Reaching out to potential stroke victims**



Davida Godett survived two strokes. She's at greater risk because she's African-American. PHOTOS BY KIM WEIMER / COURIERTIMES

**Doctor and pastors join forces to save lives**

**African-Americans face a higher risk of stroke, but they are less likely to get information about it. A local neurologist believes he's found a way to spread the message.**

By JO CIAVAGLIA  
COURIER TIMES

Nothing about Davida Godett screams "stroke risk." She is 31. Her 5-foot, 8-inch frame carries a healthy 125 pounds. She has no chronic health problems. No family history of stroke. She is a non-smoker who drinks alcohol only occasionally. Still, Godett is twice as likely to suffer an interruption of blood flow to the brain.

The reason: She is African-American. Her neurologist believes that lone genetic factor is responsible for the two strokes the former Bensalem woman suffered within 15 months, in November 2005 and again around Valentine's Day this year, leaving her with speech and memory problems.

Which is why Dr. Emil Matarese is on a mission from



Godett counts with her son Chauncey Richardson, in their Northeast Philadelphia home. After her second stroke, she suffered short-term memory loss, cognitive difficulties and speech problems.

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- Details of Godett's strokes
- The effects on people of color.

**STROKES AND PEOPLE OF COLOR**

- Black males between 35 and 54 have the highest stroke risk, four times greater than white males in that age group.
- Black women are nearly twice as likely to suffer a stroke than other racial or ethnic groups.
- Blacks face a higher death rate from stroke; on average, the death rate is 80 percent, compared with 52 percent of all stroke sufferers.

- Latinos have strokes at younger ages than other ethnic groups; hemorrhagic strokes are more common among Latinos than any other racial or ethnic group.
- Some factors that increase the risk of stroke among blacks and Latinos are higher incidences of high blood pressure, diabetes and, in blacks, sickle cell anemia.

Source: National Stroke Association

**Know the symptoms**

- Sudden numbness or weakness of face, arm or leg — especially on one side of the body, often the left side.
- Sudden confusion, trouble speaking or understanding.
- Sudden trouble seeing in one or both eyes.
- Sudden trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination.
- Sudden severe headache with no known cause.

About 25 percent of people who recover from their first stroke will have another stroke within five years. Recurrent stroke is a major contributor to stroke disability and death, with the risk of severe disability or death from stroke increasing with each recurrence.

The risk of a recurrent stroke is greatest right after a stroke, with the risk decreasing with time. About 3 percent of stroke patients will have another one within 30 days of the first; one-third of recurrent strokes take place within two years of the first.

**'I didn't know what was wrong with me'**

**Davida Godett knew only a couple of signs of stroke, but they were enough to save her life — twice.**

By JO CIAVAGLIA  
COURIER TIMES

The day before she suffered her first stroke, Davida Godett didn't feel right. She was exhausted. Her taste buds were off. Friends thought she was pregnant. The 30-year-old single mom knew only that her body was out of sorts.

"I didn't know what was wrong with me," she said. After waking the next morning, Godett said her body still felt asleep. Her entire left side felt numb and pins-and-needles tingly. She got out of bed but had trouble walking. Her vision was blurry, too.

"I think I had a stroke," she told her boyfriend. "You're walking and talking to me," he replied. But Godett remembered that left-side numbness and blurred vision were signs of a stroke. She called her mother, who told her to call the doctor. The doctor told her to get to the emergency room immediately.

Not long after she arrived at St. Mary Medical Center's primary stroke unit that day in November 2005, Godett guessed she was in serious trouble.

Neurologist Emil Matarese stuck a needle in the left side of her face. She didn't feel it.

The former Bensalem woman got to the hospital in time, though. Matarese administered a special clot-busting drug called tPA. Her first night in the hospital the feeling returned to her body. Doctors diagnosed her condition as a transient ischemic stroke, or a ministroke.

After a week of rest, Godett returned to her job as an accountant. She didn't suf-

fer any common long-term side effects such as paralysis or memory loss. Everything was going to be OK.

For 15 months, it was, too. Two days before Valentine's Day, Godett had migraines. On Valentine's Day, she shoveled snow from the driveway of her Northeast Philadelphia home. Afterward, she didn't feel right, as if she had pulled a muscle.

She felt better the next day, but as she was driving to work, her left arm went numb. By the time she arrived at work, she couldn't move it.

"Did I have another stroke?" Godett asked a co-worker.

"No, you're fine. Don't worry about it."

Godett called her mother, then the doctor who had sent her to the hospital. By the time she arrived at St. Mary's ER in Middletown, her hand had turned pale. Her speech slurred to the point that her mom, who drove, couldn't understand her.

This time, Godett had had a full-blown stroke, with side effects such as short-term memory loss, cognitive difficulties and speech problems.

Recovering from a second stroke has been more difficult, especially while caring for Chauncey, her 4-year-old son. Godett takes blood thinners now and needs to keep her stress level low.

She also pays more attention to her body, advice she shares with her friends.

"When you think of stroke in any race, you think of an older person. How many people really think of someone in their 20s or 30s having a stroke?" Godett said. "If you were to look at me, you wouldn't think I look like someone who could have a stroke."

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**Stroke: Preaching about risk factors**

From Page 1A

God, you might say. With stroke, time is brain cells. The longer medical treatment is delayed, the greater the likelihood of severe disability or death. Many people don't know the signs of a stroke, but the problem is particularly prevalent in African-American communities, experts say.

Stroke is the third leading cause of death in the United States, but African-Americans suffer more strokes at younger ages than any other racial or ethnic group, according to statistics. They also have higher stroke death rates and are less likely to make a full recovery.

Despite public awareness campaigns by the American Stroke Association, African-Americans often don't know their risk factors or how to reverse them, especially in the inner cities and rural areas where there is more poverty and limited access to health care and screening programs, studies show.

So Matarese, director of the primary stroke center at St. Mary Medical Center, is bringing his message of stroke awareness to one place where African-Americans are ready to listen — the churches.

The doctor joined with leaders of local African-American churches to organize a free evening of gospel music at the Middletown hospital on Saturday. The 400 seats filled fast for this inaugural event, featuring a keynote address by Yolanda King, daughter of late civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., as well as area gospel choirs. A stroke occurs when the

**"If each church took on the responsibility of sharing with their congregation the signs of stroke and the need for continued medical management, we could reach millions of people and save thousands of lives."**

DR. EMIL MATARESE

blood supply to part of the brain is suddenly interrupted or when a blood vessel in the brain bursts. Blood clots are usually the result of other problems in the body. Besides a natural genetic predisposition, African-Americans also have higher rates of underlying medical conditions such as diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure and high cholesterol that increase stroke risk, especially if they are untreated, medical experts say.

The faster a person is treated for stroke symptoms, the greater the chance that damage can be reversed, reducing or eliminating the need for extensive rehabilitation. If given within three hours of symptom onset, a clot-busting drug called tPA can dissolve blood clots obstructing flow to the brain. The drug is used for ischemic strokes, the most common type.

Among African-Americans, though, stroke outcomes are worse than other ethnic groups because they often delay seeking medical attention, especially in poor areas where people fear racking up expensive medical bills. African-Americans wait an average of 23 hours before seeking medical attention for stroke symptoms, Matarese said.

"A lot of people are in denial," said Marcia Wright, choir director at St. Mark

AME Zion Church and a Gospel Night committee member. "They don't want to feel something serious is wrong."

Bucks County NAACP president John Jordan knows a woman whose father had a stroke at a family gathering, but no one realized anything was seriously wrong.

"People just thought he was drunk because his words were slurred," Jordan said. "You can actually go hours having a stroke and not know it."

The Bucks NAACP chapter, too, is working with local African-American pastors as part of an effort to encourage them to talk to their congregations about pertinent health issues, including stroke awareness, Jordan said.

The church has long been a force in the African-American community. The civil rights movement was launched in the Sunday pulpits, with church leaders encouraging parishioners to support boycotts, voter rights initiatives and protest marches.

The church is also seen as a place of healing, which makes it a great setting for talking about health issues, said Wright, whose St. Mark choir will perform at Gospel Night. "You might not go to the doctor, but you'll go to church," she said.

Matarese, who lost his parents to strokes, is always

looking for unusual ways to sneak up on people with his medical information.

He participated in a dramatic, live re-creation of treating a stroke patient on the ABC show "Good Morning, America." He rented time on a popular cooking show that demonstrated heart-healthy recipes and stocked the audience with stroke survivors, and he organized athletic programs with an underlying message that healthy living reduces stroke risk.

Knowing the strong connection many African-Americans have with the church, he realized it would be the best conduit for getting out his message.

The American Stroke Association agrees. It adopted the Gospel Night idea as a national pilot program for how hospitals can use church outreach in the African-American community.

Matarese next plans to focus his campaign on the Latino community, which has a similar high risk for stroke, and the added challenge of a language barrier.

"If each church took on the responsibility of sharing with their congregation the signs of stroke and the need for continued medical management, we could reach millions of people and save thousands of lives," Matarese said.

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## STROKE AWARENESS

Churches unite to draw attention to a killer. Page 3.

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THE PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER

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### Cover Story

## A gospel of stroke awareness

Churches nationwide will help deliver the message today emphasizing the special risk to minorities.

By Kristin E. Holmes  
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Even as a patient on the stroke floor of St. Mary Medical Center, David Godett was in denial.

She had awakened that morning at home with numbness on her left side. Once at the hospital, Godett rationalized. She was only 31, thin and seemingly fit, with normal blood pressure. She must have been on the stroke floor because no other beds were available, she thought.

The Northeast Philadelphia accountant didn't realize that she has one of the most perilous of risk factors. She is African American. In her case, that trumped everything else. "When the doctors came in and gave me the diagnosis," said Godett, formerly of Bensalem, "it was shocking." Fifteen months later, she had a second stroke. Both times, it was Godett's quick response to her symptoms that proved crucial to her recovery.

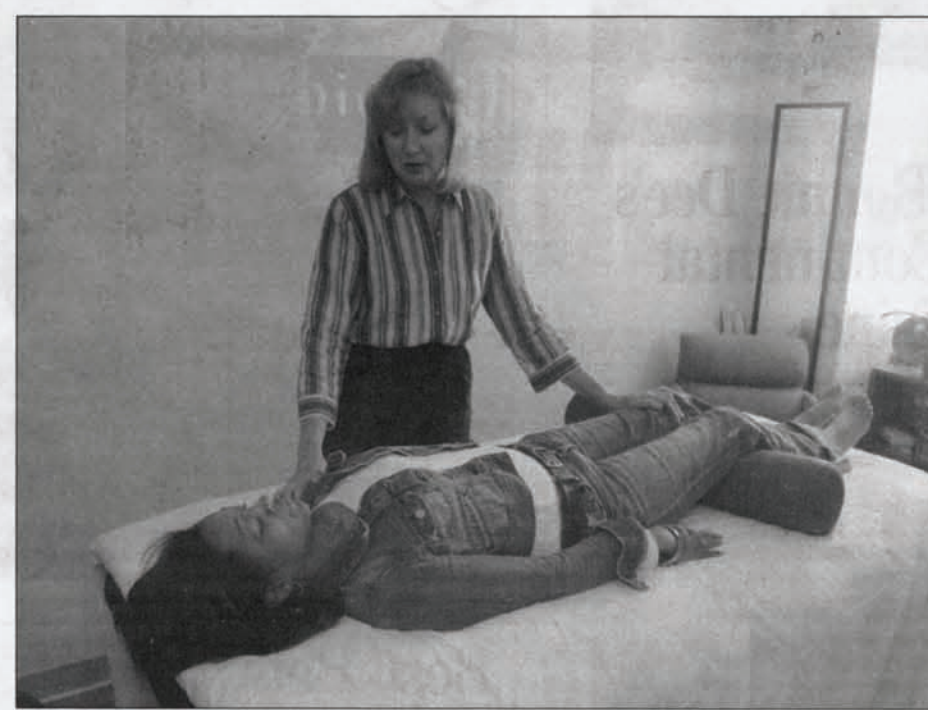
That is the gospel of stroke awareness that will be preached in churches throughout the nation today as part of the American Stroke Association's "Power to End Stroke" initiative.

The program to promote stroke education in African American and other minority communities includes today's "Power Sunday" as well as a special "Gospel Music Night for Stroke Awareness," on Saturday at St. Mary Medical Center in Middletown Township.

African Americans are four times more likely than others to have a stroke between the ages of 35 and 54 because of a genetic predisposition, said Emil L. Matarese, director of the Primary Stroke Center at St. Mary and a representative

#### ON THE COVER

Patient David Godett works with therapist Donna Sullivan at St. Mary's Primary Stroke Center. Inquirer photograph by Ron Tarver.



Stroke victim David Godett works with therapist Donna Sullivan at St. Mary Medical Center in Langhorne. Godett is only 31, thin and fit — and African American, which makes her risk significantly higher.

for the American Stroke Association. Matarese, Godett's physician, is the motivating force behind a county-wide effort to raise stroke awareness. The gospel music program — which also will focus on stroke awareness in the Hispanic community — is a joint effort of St. Mary Medical Center, the stroke association, and the NAACP of Bucks County.

There will be singing by local gospel choirs, scheduled appearances by sports figures including Bernard Hopkins and Joe Frazier, and a keynote address by association spokeswoman Yolanda King, daughter of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

A stroke occurs when blood vessels in the brain burst or become clogged. Symptoms include weakness or numbness in the face, extremities or one side of the body; confusion; slurred speech; and dizziness. The condition can cause death, paralysis, and impaired speech or cognitive skills. Treatment in the first hour is critical to prevent permanent damage. "If people realize the severity



JONATHAN WILSON / Staff Photographer  
**John Jordan, NAACP president** in Bucks County, with health flyers at Norton Avenue Baptist Church. Learn stroke symptoms, he says.

of the situation, they'll take action, said Matarese, whose parents died of stroke complications. The "Power to End Stroke" initiative is named after a song by singer Luther Vandross, who suffered a massive stroke in 2003 and was unconscious when he was discovered. He died in 2005.

Nearly 80 percent of African Americans who have a stroke die of complications, compared to 52 percent of all people who have strokes. Hispanics have strokes at younger ages than other groups, and are more likely to suffer the kind of stroke in which bleeding in the brain occurs.

Yet many people delay treatment because they don't recognize the symptoms. "There is a young lady I know personally whose dad was having a stroke and the people in the neighborhood thought he was drunk because his words were slurred," said John Jordan, president of the NAACP of Bucks County. "He died."

Others are afraid to go to the hospital because they don't have medical insurance. Lack of transportation is another obstacle, said nurse Theresa Conejo, an Hispanic community activist who does health programs throughout the region.

"We are in the suburbs, and transportation is not as easily accessible as getting a bus in Philadelphia," Conejo said. Also, for Hispanics, the language barrier often gets in the way of

#### If You Go

The Gospel Music Night for Stroke Awareness runs from 4 to 9 p.m. Saturday at the St. Mary Medical Center Auditoriums and Outpatient Care Building, 1201 Newtown-Langhorne Rd., Middletown Township. The event is free and light dinner fare will be served, but reservations are required. For reservations and more information, call 215-710-5888 or visit [www.stmaryhealthcare.org](http://www.stmaryhealthcare.org).

#### treatment.

Conejo recently did a workshop in a Hispanic neighborhood in Bensalem where a young, expectant mother had died of a stroke. "It hit home," Conejo said. "We as women, we have a tendency to put our kids first and husbands first. We stress to the ladies that you are important, too. If you have any kind of symptom, speak up and get attention."

Conejo is a member of the NAACP's health committee, and frequently visits churches to do screening and health programs. Part of the goal of the gospel night is to enlist the faith community as an ally in stroke prevention and education.

"It's all about healing," said Marcia Wright, a member of St. Mark AME Zion Church in Newtown who serves on the gospel night organizing committee. "That's the purpose of church, to spread the healing."

The Gospel Music Night for Stroke Awareness is the first step in an ongoing program. A DVD of the event will be filmed and included in an educational package to be distributed to other hospitals. Organizers plan for the music program to be an annual event in Bucks County, and one of a series of events to highlight the issue.

"This is something we don't need the health agencies and insurance companies to do for us," Matarese said. "This is something we can fix, starting at a grass-roots level."

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