

FEATURE STORY
BY TANYA DEWHURST

BODY & SOUL

The Politics of Black Women's Health

Linda Villarosa is a positive Black woman. Despite the overwhelming statistics indicating that Black women have poorer health and are dying faster than their white counterparts, Linda is resolute that Black women can and will become healthier. They will live longer, better lives, find emotional peace and get active, not only in their personal sphere but around health issues that sit between the life and death divide.

Her tool is the newly published book, *Body & Soul: The Black Women's Guide to Physical Health and Emotional Well-Being* (HarperCollins \$20.00), edited by Villarosa and supported by the National Black Women's Health Project.

As the first major health reference book targeted to Black women and written by Black women, *Body & Soul* is long overdue. "There was nothing like this," explains editor Linda. "But at *Essence* [Magazine where Linda is Executive Editor] we had so many requests for information about health, especially in a way that is understandable to people. Many women are frustrated with their doctors, they're not getting the kinds of answers that they want or they don't trust the medical system which is a natural reaction. They're looking outside asking 'Where can I get this information that is easy to understand?'"

So our goal was to make this book easy to understand and be very specifically targeted to Black women's needs which are not being met in most ways."

It is a huge book, formidably researched and carefully filled with factual information about health issues affecting Black women's lives, the political and racial inequities of the health system, cultural and social effects on Black women, problems caused by inherent racism and a slave heritage, and the all-important resources needed for self-help and getting organized. The politics of self-esteem and motivation feature heavily in *Body & Soul*, with whole sections devoted to spiritual and emotional well-being, loving ourselves and each other, and overcoming the difficulties expe-

rienced through incest, child abuse, violence and work.

One of the most outstanding features of *Body & Soul* are the sixty or so Black women recounting in first-person their health experiences and concerns: one of the first times that Black women from various backgrounds have had the chance to do so.

"We had to find a lot of people to interview in order to make the book positive and not just focus on the negative statistics and the bad things happening to Black women. There are many women out there who know how to deal with doctors and hospitals, who have found ways to use alternative medicines to heal themselves, who understand the link between medical information and their physical, emotional and spiritual selves".

However, the reality of modern life for Black women is highly disparaging and the consequences are deadly.

"Our biggest problem is around access to health care. Every disease - whether it's heart disease, stroke, cancer, diabetes, AIDS - kills Black women much more

often than it kills white women, so that our death rates are higher. Even with diseases like breast cancer where the rate for Black women contracting it is one in eleven compared to one in eight in general, our death rate is much higher. So even though less of us have breast cancer, we have - so scientists say - a more virulent strain, plus we're getting care later. We're coming in with it in a more advanced state. So our issues are around education; around not having the money to pay for health care; around being too scared to go to the doctor or not having a doctor in the community or a decent hospital.

"Secondarily, much of our problem - which is a lot more subtle and not well talked about yet - is around self-esteem. You really have to care about who you are and how you feel in order to take care of yourself, in order to go beyond the doctor's office to do the things in your life you need: eat right, exercise, take time out for yourself. You have to love



Linda Villarosa
Executive Editor of *Essence* Magazine

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