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'Closing the Gap' garners support

By [Adam Parker \(Contact\)](#)

The Post and Courier

Monday, September 3, 2007

Hospitals, radio get behind health initiative

Stroke Fore Stroke

For more information about the Stroke Fore Stroke golf outing and health expo on Sept. 7, contact Craig Miller at 853-0914 or 412-8264 or c_cathedra@bellsouth.net

On the Web

Closing the Gap in Health Care: www.closingthegapinhealthcare.com

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health: www.omhrc.gov

Dr. Thaddeus Bell is on a roll. His community health initiative, "Closing the Gap in Health Care," is getting a boost from three local hospitals and getting attention from radio executives who might help Bell spread the word nationally.

Since 2004, Bell has been speaking to the black community in an effort to educate people about their health and instill a sense of responsibility. The goal is to prevent problems before they become chronic and especially costly in an increasingly burdened health care system, and to address disparities in health outcomes between blacks and other populations, he said.

Officials at the Medical University of South Carolina, Roper-St. Francis Health Care and East Cooper Medical Center have been listening. And helping.

Roper-St. Francis has provided financial support for Bell's regular e-mail newsletter, Bell said, and East Cooper contributed to the Thaddeus John Bell Scholarship Endowment, established earlier this year in cooperation with Select Health, an insurance provider. The endowment, which has accrued more than \$100,000 so far, is meant to provide financial assistance to minority medical students who attend any of MUSC's colleges.

The three hospitals formed the Lowcountry Hospital Collaborative recently, and embraced Bell's "Closing the Gap" initiative as its first beneficiary. Roper-St. Francis spokeswoman Tricia Criminger said. The collaborative is making about \$20,000 available to support Bell's local radio broadcasts, Criminger said. The relationship

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becomes official today when the collaborative is added to the list of sponsors announced on the air.

"We all agreed this was a worthwhile endeavor to support our missions," she said. "We hope to collaborate with other hospitals and health care providers on different projects. ... We will look at other opportunities."

This is not the first time local hospitals have provided financial and administrative support for community health outreach, Crimminger said. They have sponsored health fairs, worked closely with churches, offered free health screenings and formed support groups, among other efforts. Roper St. Francis and MUSC are involved in the upcoming Stroke Fore Stroke event, a combination golf outing and health expo organized by the AME Church and designed to educate people living in the "stroke belt" about how to prevent the potentially deadly affliction.

Bell, a family doctor who has seen his share of ailments and who occasionally has showed the door to a patient who refuses to listen and learn, has been ramping up his efforts lately, motivated in part by some grim statistics.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Minority Health reported recently that blacks were significantly more likely than non-Hispanic whites to develop new cases of certain cancers; to have lower cancer survival rates; to develop diabetes, hypertension, heart disease or HIV/AIDS; and to have a stroke. Infant mortality rates are also much higher for blacks: 13.6 per 1,000 live births compared with 9.3 per 1,000 for whites.

The medical establishment is not really set up to educate people, Bell said. Its focus is the delivery of care.

So, in 2005, he began to offer short presentations on the radio, directed mostly at young black men. The only sure way to improve health statistics, he said, is to instill a sense of responsibility among those most at risk of developing problems.

"It's going to be African-Americans taking charge of their own health and asking questions," he said.

Bell's messages are broadcast up to eight times a day on Magic 101.7 FM, an R&B-soul station, and on Z93 FM, a hip-hop-R&B station. He also sits down one Saturday each month with Frankie the Big Bopper on Magic 101.7 for an hour-long live broadcast.

The funding provided by the three hospitals will keep Bell on the air for nine months, he said.

The parent company of Z93, Citadel Broadcasting Corp., is so pleased with the results of Bell's on-air message that it's looking for opportunities to spread the word in other markets, according to Paul O'Malley, the company's regional president.

The "Closing the Gap" radio segments, which began as simple public service announcements, soon were recognized as good business practice.

"Something that started out as a good thing turned into an incredible thing," O'Malley said. It was a way to localize commercial radio, set it apart from other stations and attract listeners. "It's relevant, topical and compelling."

Which means the health broadcast meets the basic criteria of radio, he said. As a result, Citadel Broadcasting has put Bell on the air in Memphis. Additional cities might soon get the signal.

Bell said more than 75,000 radio listeners hear him each day. His newsletter reaches

more than 1,000 inboxes. And MUSC is planning to offer podcasts of Bell's medical advice on its Web site.

The word is spreading, and it's making a difference.

"I have other doctors tell me it has made an impact on their patients," Bell said.

And Bell's patients? They better heed his advice, or they might be shown the door.

Reach **Adam Parker** at 937-5902 or aparker@postandcourier.com.

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