

Sleep Apnea and the Healthcare Equity Gap



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The numbers are startling: Did you know that according to [studies](#), African American children are **4 – 6 times more likely** to have sleep apnea than non-Hispanic Whites? That African American adults under 26 years of age are **88%** more likely to have sleep apnea than their White peers?

In addition to a higher rate of incidence, the rate of diagnosis is also significantly lower *and* the number of individuals that abandon therapy is significantly higher than among non-Hispanic Whites according to this [study](#) entitled, “Race and Residential Socioeconomics as Predictors of CPAP Adherence.” This means that sleep apnea has had more than a double disparate impact on African Americans' health and quality of life.

Appearing in the [UCI Public Health News & Media](#) section on “Impact of racism and inequities on African Americans’ sleep and well-being”, UCI professor of environmental and occupational health, Karen Lincoln, Ph.D., writes that “A recent study showed that African Americans, and especially men, are much more likely to die from obstructive sleep apnea compared to Whites. Sleep apnea is underdiagnosed in African Americans and once diagnosed, treatment is less successful compared to the general population. Untreated sleep apnea and poor sleep in

general, are associated with hypertension, heart disease, stroke, and diabetes – which are all prevalent chronic health conditions in Black Americans.”

What can be done to close this wide healthcare equity gap? There are a number of factors but more comprehensive screening for sleep apnea beginning in childhood would help. Additionally, a more comfortable medical ‘gold standard’ of treatment than continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) would likely increase treatment rates for those untreated individuals suffering from sleep apnea.

Who can do the most to close this major healthcare equity gap? Employers that care about equality and take corporate responsibility seriously. A starting point could be the universal and anonymous screening of employees. This would complement any existing mandatory screening requirements due to on-the job safety requirements. In addition, new phone apps and public health guidance programs like [Drowzle](#) give employers compelling and frictionless tools to raise sleep apnea awareness, screening, and diagnosis rates. Finally, promising new treatments are on the way that may improve adherence to treatment when diagnosed.

On the financial side, when it comes to employees with sleep apnea getting a good night’s sleep, employers have the most to gain economically – up to \$7,000 per employee per year according to [studies and analysis of published data](#). This is enough to incentivize the CEOs of the top 30 U. S. based employers to direct their HR departments to create employee awareness and adjust health benefits accordingly. They will demonstrate that their commitment to corporate social responsibility is real while increasing shareholder value. Now that’s a win/win proposition.

About the Author

[Michael G. Nathans](#) is the CEO and Co-Founder of WhisperSom Corporation, a medical device and informatics company. He holds a degree in biology and Pre-healing Arts from Franklin & Marshall College and has a 35-year business background that includes 5 years at PwC, two U.S. patents, and two grants from the Ford Foundation. Visit WhisperSom on [LinkedIn](#) and [Facebook](#) to follow more discussions about sleep apnea and raising the 10% diagnosis and 5% treatment rates through education and technology.