

## 10 | Public Information About Osteoporosis: What's Available, What's Needed?

about proposed methods of prevention and treatment. OTA believes, in addition, that as a publicly funded entity, the resource center should be required to state explicitly the FDA approval status of any medications mentioned in the public information it produces and to cite the reasons for FDA decisions, if any, not to approve particular medications.

Although not the immediate topic of this background paper, it is clear that federal funding for research on methods of prevention and treatment for osteoporosis is an essential component of any long-range effort to increase public knowledge about the disease. This research is needed so that definitive information about the efficacy of various methods of prevention and treatment can eventually be made available to the public.

Lastly, it should be noted that the kinds of public information materials and programs discussed in this background paper are not the only way people learn about osteoporosis. The other important source of information about osteoporosis is physicians and other health care professionals. Many health care professionals are not knowledgeable about osteoporosis. Thus, federal support for professional education and training about osteoporosis is another essential component of any long-range effort to increase public knowledge about the disease and ways to prevent and treat it.

### **PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE ABOUT OSTEOPOROSIS**

Anecdotal evidence indicates that most people have heard of osteoporosis but are not knowledgeable about the disease. The findings of a 1991 Gallup telephone survey commissioned by the National Osteoporosis Foundation supports this conclusion. A nationally representative sample of women age 45 to 75 was interviewed. Three-fourths of the 750 women interviewed considered themselves familiar with osteoporosis: 40 percent rated themselves as very familiar, and 35 percent rated themselves as somewhat familiar (83). Nevertheless, only one-fourth of the survey respondents could identify any consequence of

osteoporosis: only 17 percent knew that osteoporosis can result in curvature of the spine; only 15 percent knew that it can result in broken bones; and only 7 percent knew that it can result in height loss. Among the 40 percent who considered themselves very familiar with osteoporosis, one-fourth believed that there is no way to prevent or treat the disease.

The Gallup telephone survey identified 29 percent of the 750 survey respondents as being at high risk for osteoporosis, based on their answers to questions about family history, menopause before age 45, surgical removal of the ovaries and uterus, slender build, lack of exercise, and smoking (83). *Seventy percent of women at high risk for osteoporosis reported they had never talked to their doctor about osteoporosis because they did not see the need or were not concerned about the disease.*

A 1993 telephone survey conducted by Louis Harris and Associates for the Commonwealth Fund's Commission on Women's Health found that 73 percent of a nationally representative sample of 2,525 women age 18 and over considered themselves familiar with osteoporosis: 30 percent rated themselves as very familiar, and 43 percent rated themselves as somewhat familiar (14). Self-reported familiarity with osteoporosis varied with age: only 22 percent of the women age 18 to 45 rated themselves as very familiar with osteoporosis, compared with 39 percent of the women age 45 and over (14). Self-reported familiarity with osteoporosis also varied with educational level: only 18 percent of those with less than a high school education rated themselves as very familiar with osteoporosis, compared with 25 percent of those with a high school education and 42 percent of those with a college education (14).

OTA is not aware of any data on knowledge about osteoporosis among men. The subjects for the telephone survey conducted for the Commonwealth Fund's Commission on Women's Health included 1,000 men, but they were not asked any of the survey questions about osteoporosis (14). Considering the relatively small amount of public information about osteoporosis in men, it is likely