Trimming hair, trimming risk: Barbers promote health care

Ed Hooker has been a barber for more than 20 years. He knows that keeping his customers healthy is good for them—and it’s also good for business.

“I want to make sure my clients are healthy and let them know someone cares about them,” he says. “I also need to keep my clientele alive and teach them how to stay out there in the world so I can continue to make a living with them!”

Hooker, owner of E-Style Barbershop in Greensboro, N.C., has been an active advisory board member in several UNC barbershop-based research projects, including “Trimming Risk in Men” (TRIM) and “Cancer Understanding Today” (CUTS), that engage men in conversations about their health and urge them to get preventive health care.

Laura Linnan, ScD, associate professor of health behavior and health education at the UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health, leads the research teams working on these studies. They are offshoots of a successful project she started six years ago in beauty shops (N.C. BEAUTY and Health Project), which targeted African-American women to eat healthier, get more physical activity and obtain recommended screening tests.

“African-American men die, on average, seven years before white men, and most men often wait until they are really sick before they talk with a health care provider,” says Linnan. “If you look at most of the leading causes of death—heart disease, stroke, diabetes, cancer—it would show that African-American men are suffering higher rates than any of those groups.”

The BEAUTY, TRIM and CUTS studies are grounded in a strong partnership with directors of cosmetology and barbering schools, barbers/stylists, health care advocates and others who help guide all aspects of the research. In fact, the barbershop outreach idea came from the advisory board members. Hooker is helping researchers train barbers to help promote health in their shops, with their clients.

“Our men are very private,” he says. “When you start digging or come on too strong, you can actually push them away. A lot of barbers would rather just give him a haircut and let him leave than pester him to get check-ups. That’s when I remind the barbers that if they don’t have these men, they are going to lose business.”

The BEAUTY Project enrolled 40 beauty salons and more than 1,000 women in the study. So far, Linnan’s team has worked with more than 20 African-American women in these projects.
Yet health care professionals in High Point, N.C., were able to help a man in this situation — and even provide some follow-up care based on his test results — through a UNC-led study that centers on a strong community health care partnership. The study’s goal is to reduce colon cancer deaths by increasing the number of people who are screened early for the disease.

“Being able to talk with (the homeless man) and really educate him about the importance of screening, and also following up by helping him see a gastroenterologist, made a huge difference,” says Carin Hiott, director of chronic care for High Point Regional Health System. The system is one of the project’s partners, which also include the UNC Lineberger Comprehensive Can-

Cancer Understanding Today (CUTS) is a two-year National Cancer Institute project designed to increase calls from African-American men to its cancer hotline, 1-800-4CANCER. Linnan is encouraged by early indications from the study, which relies on barbershops to promote the health education information.

“The good news is that we definitely are seeing trends toward increased calls” after a recent education campaign about cancer and the hotline, Linnan says.