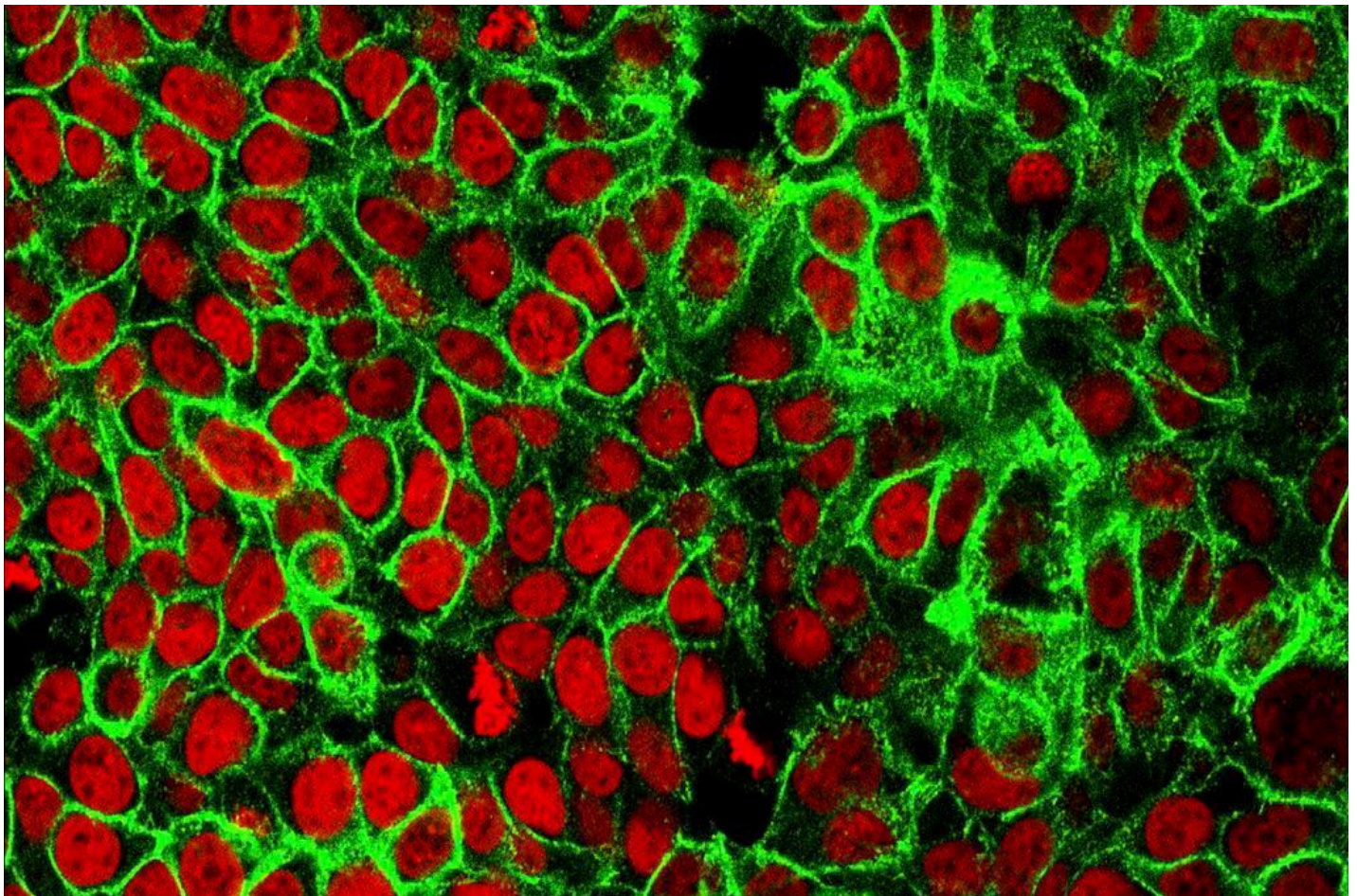


COMMENTARY

Colorectal cancer is highly preventable and treatable: Don't put off getting screened

We have the tools to fight colorectal cancer, writes the CEO of Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island, who urges all Rhode Islanders to get screened

By **Martha L. Wofford** Updated March 22, 2023, 6:00 a.m.



This microscope image made available by the National Cancer Institute Center for Cancer Research in 2015 shows human colon cancer cells with the nuclei stained red. Experts say US adults should start getting regular colon cancer screenings at age 45, five years earlier than recommended previously. ASSOCIATED PRESS

I never knew my father's mother. Colon cancer took her life at only 62, before I and my siblings were born.

After she had several miscarriages in Tennessee, she and my grandfather were determined to access better health care — traveling to New York City, where more modern care enabled her to conceive three children. Their focus on accessing good care, however, could not help her avoid what is a highly preventable cancer today. Sadly, she died of colon cancer in 1961, eight years before the colonoscopy was developed.

As we stand here in 2023 during Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month, we are fortunate to have better tools than ever to drive detection of this cancer. Yet according to the American Cancer Society, colorectal cancer remains the second most common cause of cancer deaths for men and women combined, with more than 52,000 deaths expected this year. Significant and unacceptable racial and ethnic disparities persist, with Black Americans about 20 percent more likely to get colorectal cancer and about 40 percent more likely to die from it than most other groups. And now we are seeing a new and troubling trend — a steady increase in [Americans under 55](#) being diagnosed with colorectal cancer, comprising 20 percent of all cases in the country, according to a new American Cancer Society report.

Although colorectal cancer can be deadly, it is highly preventable and treatable. Unlike most cancers, colorectal cancer can be detected early through a variety of screenings, allowing for the removal of precancerous polyps and effective treatment of early-stage cancer.

In the United States, a great deal of progress has been made. US death rates from colorectal cancer have declined more than 50 percent over the last 30 years. In Rhode Island, the Department of Health, local hospitals, community health centers, and gastroenterology practices are collaborating to further reduce these numbers, continuing to coordinate free screenings for Rhode Islanders who lack insurance.

For those with health insurance, screenings are now completely covered in Rhode Island. We applaud Governor Dan McKee, Senator Maryellen Goodwin, and Representative Mia Ackerman for their leadership in 2021, passing the “[Maryellen Goodwin Colorectal Cancer Screening Act](#)” mandating that insurers cover all examination and laboratory costs.

Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island is working to raise awareness and urge all Rhode Islanders to get screened for colorectal cancer. Right now, the screening rate among our members is 76 percent for white people, while it’s just 69 percent for African Americans and 68 percent for Latinos. We aim to reduce these disparities by half, and have set a goal that by 2026 at least 80 percent of our members ages 45 to 75 receive regular screenings.

Colonoscopies, while the gold standard for screening, just aren’t the best option for everyone. That’s especially true for some underserved populations, who often can’t take time off from work or caring for family to prep for — and undergo — a colonoscopy. We are collaborating with the Lifespan Community Health Institute and other partners to raise awareness about all screening options, including at-home kits, and to guide people to the tests most appropriate for them.

There are many cancers and medical conditions that we struggle to detect, but we have the tools to fight colorectal cancer. We can’t let decades-long racial and ethnic disparities in health care prevent all Rhode Islanders from accessing lifesaving care. Spread the word, and if you are due for a screening, talk with your primary care provider about the best option for you. Don’t put it off!

Martha L. Wofford is president and CEO of Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island.

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