



Black Americans and the Issues of the American Healthcare System

By: Karli Pilgrim

The topics of “race” and “unethical treatments” often come up in the medical/healthcare industry simultaneously, the question is why? Throughout the years, the race and ethnicity of black people in America have played a major role in healthcare facilities, but not for the right reasons. This issue stems from the racism and bias that is present within the medical field. Medical professionals are taught with biased methods and exclusive means, this is a result of the history of racism directed towards Black Americans in the U.S. The racial bias that exists in medical care currently is a direct cause of segregation and the belief that one race is lesser than the other, which has caused several issues for Black Americans throughout the years that have led to inferior outcomes for many individuals, including death. A sufficient number of Medical Examiners in America tend to lead by their bias and opinions regarding their patients before treating them, leading to a lack of care in generally sick patients. This is a large problem for Black people in the U.S. and can lead to sick people being miserable, and in pain, and can also lead to higher death rates for Black Americans.

Even though racism and bias in medical care are said to be things of the past that “doesn’t exist anymore” and that it doesn’t affect anyone presently, the history of racism in America still affects healthcare available for black people negatively today. Slavery and segregation have had long-lasting effects in America, even in the present day, including the American curriculum. Medical practitioners still get taught based on racial bias, which is a prime cause of the medical negligence that Black Americans receive from healthcare workers on a daily basis. According to an article titled “A Brief History of Racism in Medical Care” by Harry Kretchmer, it is stated that “medical racism has often been based on the myth that Black people have different – and inferior – bodies” (Kretchmer, Harry, 1). It is a known fact that in the past, the black community was viewed as lesser than or inferior to the white community. This form of opinion caused people to think that black people “didn’t feel pain” and that they didn’t need the same forms of treatment as their white superiors, which led to dangerous outcomes for the sick or hurt Black Americans who needed medical attention. As a result of this behavior caused by false myths and beliefs, black people – specifically African Americans – have higher sickness and death rates compared to White Americans. As written in a journal called “Race, medicine, and Health Care in the United States: A Historical Survey”, it is said that “Racism is, at least in part, responsible for the fact African Americans, since arriving as slaves, have had the worst health care, the worst health status, and the worst health outcome of any racial or ethnic group in the U.S.” (Byrd, W. M. et al., 1). This quote states that African Americans have the worst health status and outcome over any other group of people in the U.S. and that this issue is a direct effect of the racism that is still rooted in the American Healthcare system. As another consequence of racism and segregation, the American learning curriculum is racially and ethnically biased, this is an issue that unfortunately extends into the medical school curriculum as well. Sometimes, the medical health care system isn’t biased because of the opinions of the medical professionals, but it might be because of how they are taught in medical schools. Many people, including some healthcare and medical professionals, believe that there is a problem with the healthcare curriculum not being diverse enough, and with it not containing the facts and pictures needed to tell what a disease, sickness, and illness looks like on a POC (person of

color) – or more specifically – a black or brown person. Medical school students and attendees usually do not like to believe that there is a clear racial bias in their curriculum, however, many medical school courses and curricula have been researched and proven to be a main factor in racial bias healthcare workers subconsciously have. As it is acclaimed in a medical journal titled “Misrepresenting Race — The Role of Medical Schools in Propagating Physician Bias”, written March 4th, 2021, “Researchers have highlighted the domains of misuse of race in medical school curricula and their potential role in propagating physician bias. In examining more than 880 lectures from 21 courses in one institution’s 18-month preclinical medical curriculum, we found five key domains in which educators misrepresent race in their discussions, interpretations of race-based data, and assessments of students’ mastery of race-based science.” (Amutah, Christina, et al., 1). It is proven by numerous kinds of research and studies done that the racial bias black Americans receive from doctors and nurses daily, is likely caused by medical care professionals obliviously picking up the medical schools’ bias, and the unjust curriculum directed towards POC. The history of racism and segregation in America has caused medical schools to become biased towards people with black and brown skin, interfering with the health and well-being of black people in America, which is a direct cause of how the sickness and death rates of black people are at an all-time high when compared to their white counterparts.

Many black Americans end up dying from their illness because of the lack of medical care they receive while in a hospital. The friends and families of these innocent people typically find it hard to recover and grieve their loved ones because they get left in the dark about what truly happened to them. Black Americans who are affected by these doctors’ and nurses’ malpractice tend to find it hard to share their stories and gain justice, which is a direct cause of Americans – specifically White Americans – and medical practitioners not believing that medical negligence and malpractice caused by race and ethnicity is a thing that still happens today. As Alie Streeter stated in her personal story from the article titled “With a history of abuse in American medicine, Black patients struggle for equal access” written February 24th, 2021, “I have a 7-year-old who...had a very severe medical issue...we were repeatedly ignored over and over and over and over again. And it took me bringing his white father to repeat what I have been saying for the three previous appointments for them to take it seriously.” (Alcindor, Yamiche, et al., 1). People like to assume that the Black Americans who come out with their stories to spread awareness are “paranoid”, that they do not know what they are talking about, and that they should blindly listen to the medical professionals, even when the professionals won’t listen to them. Luckily, some people get to tell either their or their loved one’s story to spread awareness and receive justice, like, for instance, the case of Henrietta Lacks and how she was mistreated by doctors and scientists both before and after her death. Henrietta Lacks was one of the many mistreated black women in the U.S. who ended up dying from medical negligence, but she was also very different. While treating Henrietta for cancer she had, the doctors and researchers at John Hopkins Hospital found out that she had invincible cells that could never die. They ended up taking these cells from Henrietta without her or her family knowing the actuality of what was happening. As a result of the doctors taking advantage of Henrietta, they founded HeLa cells. According to a John Hopkins medical article called “The Importance of HeLa Cells”, it is stated, “Over the past several decades, this cell line has contributed to many medical breakthroughs, from...the development of polio and COVID-19 vaccines, to the study of leukemia, the AIDS virus and cancer worldwide.” (Butanis, Benjamin, 1). The problem with this is that Henrietta got little to no credit for this incredible discovery, some people who knew, learned about, and



worked with HeLa cells, didn't even know who she was or her story. Fortunately, writer and researcher, Rebecca Skloot, also saw this as a problem and wanted to help by publicizing Henrietta's story. Rebecca wrote a book about Henrietta's home life, health, and who she was as a human. Rebecca also took it upon herself to interview and write about Henrietta's family, and how they were affected by what happened to Henrietta. This book is called "The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks", and its impact has even led to a movie about the story of Henrietta Lacks and medical consent within the African American community. Rebecca Skloot stated her reasoning for writing about Henrietta in several different ways, all of which were written in her book, "As I graduated from high school and worked my way through college toward a biology degree, HeLa cells were omnipresent. I heard about them in histology, neurology, pathology; I used them in experiments on how neighboring cells communicate. But after Mr. Defler, no one mentioned Henrietta." (Skloot, Rebecca, 6). On behalf of Rebecca Skloot bringing Henrietta and her family's story to light, Henrietta Lacks is finally getting justice for what happened many years ago. Sadly, this isn't the case for most black families in America, some will never gain justice for what has happened to them. This is both a prominent and dangerous issue; if we do not acknowledge it, the trust that Black Americans have in medical workers and hospitals will continue to deteriorate, which will cause a steady uprising in the sickness, illness, and death rates of Black people in the United States.

To conclude, there are many causes and effects of racial bias in the healthcare community. On a day-to-day basis, black people continually must prove themselves to both medical professionals and society as a whole. The black community is physically and mentally affected by medical malpractice and negligence caused by racism and bias in the medical field and America as a whole. With these facts in mind, many black people hope that the deeply rooted fear of healthcare facilities and workers will one day be gone and that with enough awareness, people will take their thoughts, words, and overall health seriously.



Works Cited

Alcindor, Yamiche, et al. *With a History of Abuse in American Medicine, Black Patients Struggle for Equal Access*. PBS NewsHour, 2021.

Amutah, Christina, et al. "Misrepresenting Race - the Role of Medical Schools in Propagating Physician Bias." *The New England Journal of Medicine*, vol. 384, no. 9, 2021, pp. 872–878, doi:10.1056/NEJMms2025768.

Butanis, Benjamin. "The Importance of HeLa Cells." *Hopkinsmedicine.org*, 18 Feb. 2022, <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/henrietalacks/importance-of-hela-cells.html>.

Corsino, Leonor, et al. "The Impact of Racial Bias in Patient Care and Medical Education: Let's Focus on the Educator." *MedEdPORTAL : The Journal of Teaching and Learning Resources*, vol. 17, 2021, p. 11183, doi:10.15766/mep_2374-8265.11183.

"How Medical Schools Can Transform Curriculums to Undo Racial Biases." *Pennmedicine.org*, <https://www.pennmedicine.org/news/news-releases/2021/january/how-medical-schools-can-transform-curriculums-to-undo-racial-biases>. Accessed 5 May 2023.

"How Medical Schools Perpetuate Physician Bias." *Penn LDI*, 8 Feb. 2021, <https://ldi.upenn.edu/our-work/research-updates/how-medical-schools-perpetuate-physician-bias/>.

Kretchmer, Harry. "A Brief History of Racism in Healthcare." *World Economic Forum*, 23 July 2020, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/07/medical-racism-history-covid-19/>.

Ndugga, Nambi, and Samantha Artiga. "How Recognizing Health Disparities for Black People Is Important for Change." *KFF*, 13 Feb. 2023, <https://www.kff.org/policy-watch/how-recognizing-health-disparities-for-black-people-is-important-for-change/>.

"Significant Research Advances Enabled by HeLa Cells." *Office of Science Policy*, 22 Aug. 2022, <https://osp.od.nih.gov/hela-cells/significant-research-advances-enabled-by-hela-cells/>.

Skloot, Rebecca. *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. Macmillan, 2010.

"The Color of Pain: Blacks and the U.s. Health Care System – Can the Affordable Care Act Help to Heal a History of Injustice? Part I." *NLG Review - Social Justice Law Journal by the National Lawyers Guild*, *NLG Review*, 29 June 2017, <https://www.nlg.org/nlg-review/article/the-color-of-pain-blacks-and-the-u-s-health-care-system-can-the-affordable-care-act-help-to-heal-a-history-of-injustice-part-i/>.

Nih.gov, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2593958/>. Accessed 3 May 2023.



Nih.gov, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8657581/>. Accessed 5 May 2023.

Nih.gov, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2640620/>. Accessed 7 May 2023.