Increasing minorities in medical schools: Programs alter the pipeline

FEB 11, 2016

Staff News Writer

The number of black men attending medical school hasn’t increased since 1978, underscoring a critical need for initiatives that will attract black men to medicine. How can medical schools and organizations tackle this timely issue? Learn from these key pipeline programs that already are helping underrepresented minorities overcome societal barriers to successfully transition to medical school.

Last year, the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) released its report, “Altering the Course: Black Men in Medicine,” which highlighted the decline among black men applying to and attending medical schools in the last 36 years. As a follow-up to the report, the AAMC, the AMA and the Student National Medical Association (SNMA) held a webinar that discussed new solutions that will help increase the number of underrepresented minorities—particularly black men—attending medical school.

Barriers to black men entering medicine

Before institutions create new solutions, they should first understand societal barriers, said Cedric Bright, MD, a former president of the National Medical Association and assistant dean of Special Programs and Admissions to Medical School at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Common barriers include a lack of proper primary education in science and math subjects and economic constraints that must be overcome to navigate a rigorous and expensive medical school application process.

Dr. Bright also stressed the importance of planting physician mentors and role models in communities of color to help minority children even conceive of the idea to become a physician.

Aside from entertainers and athletes, Dr. Bright said, “it’s very rare that we have substantial role models that are shown in media, and I think that sends a certain message to our children about who
Physicians, mentors and medical school counselors wield major influence, Dr. Bright said, especially among young black men in college who are exploring premedical education. While some students may desire to pursue a career in medicine, “oftentimes they’re not getting the kind of encouragement to keep moving.”

“I saw that a lot in my undergraduate days, when we had roughly 45 black students who were premed at the beginning of my class. And by the end of our four years, there were only about 20 of us who actually took the MCAT and continued on the path [to medical school],” Dr. Bright said. “A lot of that had to do with the ‘weeding out’ classes that occurred and how they impacted students’ perception of how competitive [medical school] would be.”

How physicians and educators can increase the number of minorities in medicine

To help students overcome educational, social and economic barriers, medical schools and organizations have developed strategic programs that provide underrepresented minorities the knowledge and resources they need to pursue careers in medicine. Some key programs presenters discussed in the webinar included:

The SSTRIDE and Master’s Bridges programs at Florida State University (FSU)

“The pipeline needs to start early, even before middle school,” said Alma Littles, MD, a family physician and senior associate dean for Medical Education and Academic Affairs at FSU. She also serves as chair of the AMA Academic Physicians Section, which recently broadened its mission to focus on diversity among faculty and in medical education.

At FSU, “we have a successful model called the SSTRIDE©—Science Students Together Reaching Instructional Diversity and Excellence—program that we believe can be deployed in many settings,” Dr. Littles said. “It’s a program that actually starts at the middle school level and continues through high school, undergraduate and even into our Master’s Bridge Program.”

The SSTRIDE program identifies students who are interested in pursuing a career in science, engineering, mathematics, health or medicine and gives them support services that help them develop a sense of responsibility, focus and motivation that is necessary to succeed in their chosen fields.

Students in the Master’s Bridge Program take a year of medical and clinical science courses that can

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be applied toward a Master of Science in Biomedical Sciences. After successfully completing the program, students are admitted to FSU’s medical school, where educators provide them with additional resources, such as mentoring and advising throughout their medical school training.

“If we’re going to get serious about attracting more black men to medicine,” Dr. Littles said, institutional leaders and educators must “provide students resources that will continue to enhance their success and not make them feel isolated, neglected or guilty [for being admitted].”

The Pipeline Mentoring Institute of the SNMA

While schools and educators work to promote diversity, medical students in the SNMA also have created a network of effective programs that can help increase the number of black men in medicine—a key part of the organization’s mission, said Anthony Kulukulualani, a third-year medical student at Tufts University School of Medicine and the SNMA national president.

“Through our pipeline programs, SNMA provides outreach and improvement to the medical field by targeting students as young as grammar school all the way through college,” Kulukulualani said. “We also provide academic resources and mentoring to help strengthen the retention of students once they enter medical schools.”

SNMA’s Pipeline Mentoring Institute houses five different pipeline programs for underrepresented minority students at various stages of their education and personal development, Kulukulualani said.

For instance, the SNMA’s Youth Science Enrichment Program “serves to stimulate elementary and junior high school students’ interest in science and health,” Kulukulualani said. “And this continues with the Health Professions Recruitment Exposure Program, which exposes high school students to science-related activities, while introducing them to careers in the health field.”

The SNMA also hosts the Brotherhood Alliance for Science Education, which “really tackles the issue of attracting black males to medicine” by partnering with grassroots and minority organizations working to increase “the encouragement, recruitment, admission and retention of young minority males into medicine,” Kulukulualani said.

The Pipeline Mentoring Institute also hosts programs that offer underrepresented minority students mentorship and resources throughout their premedical training. Learn more about the institute’s various pipeline programs.

The AMA’s Doctors Back to School Program (DBTS) and Minority Scholars Award

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“Organized medicine has a critical role to play” in ensuring that diversity in medicine is a real priority in health care, said Patrice A. Harris, MD, chair-elect of the AMA Board of Trustees.

Dr. Harris said the AMA has developed critical policies and programs that support diversity in medicine. For instance, through the AMA's Doctor's Back to School Program, physicians and physicians in training visit elementary schools to speak with students in underrepresented communities about future careers in medicine.

“This is a critical program,” Dr. Harris said. “The AMA Minority Affairs Section … conducts Doctor’s Back to School visits in conjunction with each AMA Interim and Annual Meeting.” The most recent program visits were hosted during the 2015 AMA Interim Meeting in Atlanta, where AMA members spoke to 900 children across two elementary schools.

The AMA Foundation’s Minority Scholars Award has provided $1.5 million in tuition assistance to nearly 150 medical students since the award was founded in 2004. The deadline for 2016 applicants is March 4. Dr. Harris noted that Kulukualani was among the award’s competitive scholarship recipients.

Dr. Harris said the organization’s diversity efforts remind her of how valuable support for underrepresented minority students really is: “I grew up in West Virginia and wanted to be a physician since the eighth grade, but when I got to college, one of my college advisors recommended I attend nursing school,” Dr. Harris said. “Nursing is a noble profession but wasn’t what I wanted to do, so we need to make sure that there’s support out there for those who want to go to medical school and that support begins early.”

Dr. Harris underscored that there needs to be a “continuum of support … to [engage] African-American men and make sure they are well represented in medical schools as our future physician leaders.”