

Medical students can play crucial diversity role—as mentors

NOV 5, 2019

Brendan Murphy

Senior News Writer

Roughly 6% of medical students are African American, a figure that does not reflect the patient panels physicians encounter—12% of the United States' population is African American.?

Diversity in the physician workforce has known benefits—including improved patient outcomes—and medical schools are working to create more of it. A recent graduate of the University of Michigan School of Medicine (U of M) doesn't have the patience to wait for generational change.?

“As a medical student, diversity gets more narrow,” said Jasmyne Jackson, MD, a graduate of U of M who is now a first-year pediatrics resident at Boston Children's Hospital. “So, you are the representative. You are expected to step up for diversity positions. At the same time, you are facing a lot of unconscious bias and even outside the hospital there's still a lot of national events that affect you. As a queer black woman, I remember when the Pulse [night club] shooting occurred and—feeling targeted—to then go back into my surgery rotation and act like nothing happened.”

Making impact as mentors

To facilitate a change in the constitution of Michigan's medical student body, Jackson helped start the Future Physician Summit, an outreach program aimed at attracting underrepresented minorities to medical schools.?

The project earned her third place in the AMA Accelerating Change in Medical Education Consortium's Health Systems Science Student Impact Competition, which recognized medical students for implementing projects that created positive changes within health systems.?

Debuting in 2018, the Future Physician Summit aims to empower minority undergraduate, high school and middle-school students who are interested in medical careers using a multitiered approach. Medical student mentors teach undergrads about the clinical aspects of practice and those undergrads

then teach the younger students the lessons they gleaned.?

“Undergraduate students are gaining medical knowledge and cultivating leadership skills,” Jackson said during a presentation at the 2019 ChangeMedEd® national conference. “The youth attendees are the ones who are extracting exposure and knowledge and approving their college readiness.”?

The AMA Doctors Back to School™ program also aims to increase the number of minority physicians and work toward eliminating racial and ethnic health disparities. The program sends minority physicians and medical students into the community as a way to introduce children to professional role models and show kids of all ages from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups that a career in medicine is attainable for everyone. Learn more about the AMA’s work to reduce disparities in health care.

Tackling barriers

The Future Physician Summit focuses on some key facets of a career in medicine and the steps to getting there.?

“For college readiness, we wanted to tackle some of the barriers relevant to individuals coming from low-income areas,” Dr. Jackson said. “To talk about what does financial aid look like? How do you select schools? How does the FAFSA [Free Application for Federal Student Aid] work? What does it look like to send an email? We wanted to get into some of the professional development that kids may not have had access to.”

Participants were given penlights, stethoscopes and reflex hammers. They also received lessons in different topics related to health disparities—hypertension, asthma and patient communication.?

Laying a foundation

Following the inaugural Future Physicians Summit in 2018, participants took a survey and reported a significant increase in their confidence to pursue a career in medicine. One undergraduate team member has since enrolled in medical school.?

Among medical student respondents, the event increased their dedication to mentorship, community outreach and medical education through the valued experiences of teaching clinical skills to junior students.?

The event doubled in size in 2019. White coats were added to the swag bags given to participants. The vision of those younger students putting on white coats was a powerful one for Dr. Jackson.?

“If you look at the statistics, it doesn’t feel like medicine values diversity, but by having this day students can see that their thoughts, values and experiences are important in influencing the future of clinical care,” she said.?

“This summit is exactly what I needed to reassure my decision to go into a medical field and become a physician,” Dr. Jackson said. “It reinforced my commitment to teaching the next generation of medical students during residency.”