

Q&A with Oprah shines light on COVID-19 impact on minorities

APR 15, 2020

Sara Berg, MS

Senior News Writer

The message being spread is that COVID-19 does not discriminate. However, it has amplified the health inequities that marginalized communities often face. In a virtual interview with Oprah Winfrey on Apple TV+, AMA Chief Health Equity Officer Aletha Maybank, MD, MPH, discusses the pandemic's dramatic effects on African American communities across the country. She also explained when individuals should call 911 for COVID-19 symptoms and what to look out for.

“Racism rears itself all the time and during something like COVID, it amplifies and we are always kind of called into question, do we have to worry about what that person is going to do to us? Are they going to walk to the other side of the street? Are we going to, you know, be followed by the police if we have this mask on?” said Dr. Maybank, group vice president of the Center for Health Equity at the AMA. “It is our reality as black folk walking through this world.”

As systemwide bias and institutionalized racism contribute to inequities across the U.S. health care system, the AMA continues to fight for greater health equity by identifying and eliminating inequities through advocacy, community leadership and education.

“The other piece that I think is absolutely critical—and this is as a health leader—is that we have to work towards dismantling racism in our systems,” said Dr. Maybank. “It sounds big and it is big, but I don't feel we can get to meaningful solutions unless we name structural racism as the fundamental cause of why these health inequities exist in the first place.”

What communities of color should do

For the African American communities that have been ravaged by COVID-19, Dr. Maybank wants them to continue to stay at home if they are able to and to practice physical distancing.

For those who need to go to work or be out in the community, “when you come home, take your clothes off, try to have a bag by the door so that you can put your clothes within the bag and put it aside,” she said, adding that if they have a face mask, they can wash it with soap and water.

Dr. Maybank also reinforced the importance of physical distancing in the home until you have showered and properly cleaned off. “That should be the first thing you do when you come home if you’ve been out with other people,” she said.

Essential data is needed

The AMA continues to demand urgent action to address the tragic shortages of essentials such as timely COVID-19 testing, personal protective equipment and ventilators. But another shortage desperately requires attention: There is a lack of public data on the racial and ethnic dimensions of COVID-19 reporting.

This is why the AMA continues to call on the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and its subagencies, state and local health departments, health care institutions, and laboratories to standardize, collect and immediately make publicly available existing race and ethnicity data to prioritize equity and effectively manage the COVID-19 pandemic.

Leading voices of the nation’s physician bodies, especially those who represent doctors of color, came together in a recent panel hosted by the AMA to discuss COVID-19 and how it disproportionately affects minority communities. Read more about how COVID-19 is affecting physicians and communities of color across the country.

There are less than a dozen states that have publicly shared information on the racial and ethnic patterns of COVID-19. In this Leadership Viewpoint, Dr. Maybank explains why racial and ethnic data on COVID-19’s impact is badly needed. This importance of this message was echoed in her *New York Times* op-ed column, “The Pandemic’s Missing Data.”

The AMA and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention are closely monitoring the COVID-19 global pandemic. Learn more at the AMA COVID-19 resource center and consult the AMA’s physician guide to COVID-19.