

Dale Okorodudu, MD, on the need for more Black men in medicine

AMA's Moving Medicine video series amplifies physician voices and highlights developments and achievements throughout medicine.

Featured topic and speakers

In today's episode of Moving Medicine, in recognition of Juneteenth, the AMA talks with physician and social entrepreneur, Dale Okorodudu, MD, about "Black Men in White Coats," a collaborative effort that seeks to increase the number of Black men in the field of medicine through exposure, inspiration and mentoring.

Learn more about Black Men in White Coats and find more about AMA member access to screening information.

Speaker

- Dale Okorodudu, MD, founder, Black Men in White Coats

Transcript

Unger: Hello, this is the American Medical Association's Moving Medicine video and podcast. Today, as we recognize Juneteenth, we're talking with physician and social entrepreneur, Dr. Dale Okorodudu about Black Men in White Coats, a collaborative effort that seeks to increase the number of Black men in the field of medicine through exposure, inspiration and mentoring. He's asked me to call him Dr. Dale. Dr. Dale is the founder of Black Men in White Coats, DiverseMedicine Inc. and PreMed Star, and he's the author of two upcoming books and a practicing pulmonary and critical care physician at the Dallas VA Medical Center and is calling in from Dallas. I'm Todd Unger, AMA's chief experience officer in Chicago.

Well, Dr. Dale, thanks so much for joining us today. I'd like to start with your own story about

challenges that you overcame on your journey to becoming a physician. Can you talk about those and are there moments that stay with you that help drive your desire and will make it easier for others?

Dr. Okorodudu: Yeah, so certainly, so first of all, thanks for having me. I'm super thrilled to have this few minutes with you. You say, "Are there stories?" Probably the biggest story I would say goes back to when I was in college. There was one time where I was flying home. Actually I wasn't flying home, I was flying to a wedding from St. Louis to Chicago, and there was a woman sitting on the plane next to me. I'd never met her. She sits down next to me. She sees the way that I'm dressed, big baggy sweatpants, a baggy hoodie. That's just the way I dressed when I was in college. And for the whole entire flight, she just criticized me, said I couldn't speak well, couldn't talk well. And long story short, she told me that I wasn't going to be successful. And I remember leaving thinking, "Is that what people think when they see individuals who look like me?" So that's really been a motivation for me over the years.

Unger: Well, that's a tough story and you've kind of leveraged that kind of learning and stories like that to help inspire more Black men to pursue a career in medicine. Can you talk about how you use storytelling and elevating these kinds of stories as a key part of your strategy?

Dr. Okorodudu: Yeah, definitely. So storytelling is huge. It's huge. So people need to be able to see what other people have done in order to believe that they can do it, especially when there's few people that look like them in a certain field. So when we can show profiles of successful Black physicians, men, women, whoever, show these profiles, we help inspire the next generation to say, "Hey, look at their story. They're like me. If they can do it, I can do it also."

Unger: What's the most effective way of storytelling, in your book I was going to say it, but how do you do that?

Dr. Okorodudu: We just let people tell their own story. I think oftentimes society gets caught up with trying to tell other people's stories. You see it in the media. We want to tell somebody else's story—that's how you get rumors and tabloids. We say, "Hey, tell us your story. We're going to show it to the world. We're going to depict it in a beautiful way, but it's going to come from you so that way people can hear your challenges, your experiences and then they can better relate to it if it comes directly from you."

Unger: So you've got the storytelling component and then a second component on top of that is the mentoring part. That's a harder part to scale across a wide range of audience. So you've leveraged technology in a unique way to facilitate this. Can you talk about how you're approaching mentoring?

Dr. Okorodudu: Sure, yeah. Now, post COVID era, everybody's on Zoom and such and everybody's getting used to the technology, but when we started, I started a nonprofit over 10 years ago now, and the whole idea was web-based mentoring. So we've been doing this web-based stuff for quite some time. So we do a lot of web-based mentoring. We have a website, [diversemedicine.com](https://www.ama-assn.org/education/medical-school-diversity/dale-okorodudu-md-need-more-black-men-medicine), now. It's kind

of like automated virtual mentoring, where it allows you to find a mentor and we'll give you a mentoring curriculum. The other thing we do is quarterly mentoring luncheons. So actually we have one in a few weeks coming up. We have hundreds of students, kids, parents and doctors on a big webinar thing. We break up into little groups and we let the students have a chance to sit down virtually and have mentoring while they snack on some lunch at their own house.

Unger: What does mentoring look like in this paradigm that's different from the way that someone might imagine one-on-one mentoring?

Dr. Okorodudu: Yeah. With technology, the great thing about it is it really does allow you to scale, like what you said. So while it's important to have that intimate one-on-one relationship with mentoring, when you're trying to get more Black men, Black woman, people from underserved communities into the field of medicine, sometimes you have to go more than one-on-one. So the technology, the difference is it allows us to do more than one-on-one, but still be effective, still be effective. So that's what we're really focused on is how can we take the few physicians we have who are willing to do this mentoring and to be consistent in it, and how can we amplify their voices and let them reach more and more people? And technology, like you said, is what's allowing that to happen.

Unger: How does the social network aspect fit into this?

Dr. Okorodudu: Yeah, so our website, diversemedicine.com, has its own social networking aspect, but also you talk about Twitter and Instagram and such. It fits in perfectly because now you can just put pictures up online and bombard the internet with images of Black men, woman, anybody from a marginalized community, put them online and say, "Hey, look at us. We did it. Look where we came from. We did it." And you get to show people that, "Hey, we did it. You can do it too." But the other thing, Todd, to recognize is we get to show people who might not believe that we could have done it, like the woman on the airplane, so she gets to see somebody like me now in a white coat to say, "Hey, you know what? I didn't think he could do it, but look, he has done it." So it changes their perceptions as well.

Unger: Dr. Dale, you've done this amount of mentoring. Do you get kind of a common set of questions from folks or a type of wisdom that is most commonly asked for?

Dr. Okorodudu: Yeah. I mean goodness, there's so many common threads and really it's all the same stuff. I'll say what the hardest one is, which I still haven't quite figured out, it comes down to resources. So the hardest thing, which I think we as community and society needs to figure out to improve health care for everybody, is for those individuals who can become doctors, but don't have the resources to get there. How do we as a society help do that? So one of the things we focus on, we focus on finding ways to provide those resources. We partner with organizations, we pay for MCAT, we do all sorts of things like that to help individuals get these resources.

Unger: Well, you've spoken of a quote "wake-up call" that led to the development of Black Men in

White Coats. Can you talk about what that was and why it was so important to act on it, especially at this time?

Dr. Okorodudu: Yeah, so that wake-up call for me came in the year 2013. A report came out from the AAMC, said the number of Black men applying to med school was less in 2011 than it was in 2002. Now a bigger report has since come out saying it was less in 2014 than it was in 1978. But that was a wake-up call, that blew my mind. I thought there was no way that that could be possible. We invest so much money in this, why are the numbers going down? So we knew we had to do something. And I didn't have any resources myself to do it, so we simply started it by getting a cell phone, I propped it up on my wallet and we filmed a little 30, 45 minute video. We called it Black Men in White Coats and that's how all this started. And we weren't intending for all this to happen, but it snowballed into something that's having quite the effect now.

Unger: Do you have any insight as to why that's the case that we would see kind of that reverse progress so to speak in this arena?

Dr. Okorodudu: Yeah, so a lot of things, quite a few reasons. One reason I'll say is the way society has portrayed Black men in the media throughout the 1990s. If you look at the 1990s, the Black man was not portrayed in a very positive light in the 1990s so that puts bias in people's minds. That gives low expectations of Black men. You've heard the quote, "The soft bigotry of low expectations." A lot of Black boys, we had to deal with that throughout the 1990s and early 2000s and such. So society really, it's hard to say society was really rooting for the young Black man throughout the 1990s, early 2000s and such. The other thing is the numbers for Black individuals as a whole was going up. So we thought that good things were happening, but what we came to realize was it's because Black women were going up significantly, but Black men were actually going down.

Unger: Well, you've produced a documentary that you're going to be screening in medical schools and other institutions around the country, including at the AMA. Can you tell us more about it and what you're hoping to accomplish with it?

Dr. Okorodudu: Yes. First of all, thank you to the AMA for partnering with us on this. AMA will be having 100 screenings across the country, and we've already had probably close to 1,000 screenings across the country in medical schools and such. And really, we just tell the story about Black Men in White Coats, the lack of Black men, why that's the case and we try to provide solutions for how to make it better. And simply all we want to do is encourage people to take action. That's it. Encourage everybody to take action, however they can. If you're a physician, "Hey, maybe I can mentor somebody." If you're a dean of admissions, "Hey, maybe we can do some training for our admissions committee." We want everybody to take action to whatever capacity they can take action to themselves. And let me make sure I add, if you're that young Black male, "Hey, I'm going to take action by making sure I've got my own act together for my grades and such." We want to make sure everybody's accountable for their own input in solving this problem.

Unger: What are you hearing back from the people that have watched the documentary?

Dr. Okorodudu: Oh my goodness. It's phenomenal, Todd. So I didn't think it was going to be this great. It's been really phenomenal. I mean we have over 1,000 reviews. It got to be so much, I stopped checking. Over 1,000 five-star reviews. It was so much that I stopped looking, but it's things like people's lives being changed. We're getting feedback from CEOs of health care systems, from presidents, from deans. People are really being inspired to move, to take that action and that makes us feel good because that was the exact reason why we made the film.

Unger: Well, that's got to feel really good. For medical schools that are interested in hosting or participating in the screening, where should they find out more information?

Dr. Okorodudu: So they can go, I believe the AMA will actually have information on your website, so they can go to the AMA website, and then they can also find out more by going to bmwcmovie.com.

Unger: And that URL would be ama-assn.org/blackmen-whitecoats so check that out for more information and have a screening at your school. Is there anything else that you want to make sure that young Black men hear, either from physicians or other role models in their lives?

Dr. Okorodudu: I just want everybody to understand that first of all, you can do this, no matter what anybody tells you. I think back to the woman on the airplane for me again, and by the grace of God, I had been raised in a way to know not to believe what she was telling me. So you can do this, the first thing to know. Second thing is we're here to help you. AMA doing this interview with me because they want to help. We want to help, AAMC wants to help. There are a lot of programs across the country that wants to help you. And the third thing is, I want to challenge every individual to be accountable for their own success. So it's your dream, it's your vision, it's your future, you have people willing to help you. Push as hard as you can to achieve it.

Unger: Well, I'm really glad that you didn't listen to that person on the plane and that you took that



experience forward to where you are and how you're paying it forward so to speak by encouraging Black men to enter the field of medicine. Thanks so much Dr. Dale for being here with us today. That's it for Moving Medicine podcast and video. For more great content from the AMA, please subscribe or visit ama-assn.org. Thanks for being here today and sharing your important work, Dr. Dale. The AMA is very, very proud to support Black Men in White Coats and is committed to increasing medical school admissions among historically excluded and marginalized groups. And once again, ama-assn.org/blackmen-whitecoats for more information. Thanks again.

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