Organization aims to get Black men in medicine through inspiration

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Brendan Murphy
News Writer

In 1978, Black men accounted for 3.1% of the medical student body across the nation. According to data gathered by the Association of American Medical Colleges, that number was lower four decades later.

As the leader of Black Men in White Coats, Dale Okorodudu, MD—an internist at UT Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas—seeks to change those stagnating figures. Dr. Okorodudu, who also produced a documentary named after his organization, recently joined an episode of “AMA Moving Medicine” to discuss how his program aims to increase the number of Black men in the field of medicine through exposure, inspiration and mentoring.

Seeing yourself in medicine

Inspiration, Dr. Okorodudu said, starts with an image. Young Black men need to see people like them working as physicians to believe that can be in their future.

“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,” he said. “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.’”

The next step in the process is facilitating conversations between Black physicians and the next generation of potential doctors. Black Men in White Coats works as an organization to connect physician mentors with potential mentees. Mentors often work in groups to maximize their impact.

“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,” Dr. Okorodudu said. “The technology …
allows us to do more than one-on-one, but 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?"

The root of the problem

Dr. Okorodudu believes the opportunity gap that exists in marginalized communities is about how people view themselves and how they have been portrayed in mass media. He hopes his documentary will help to change perceptions.

“Storytelling is huge,” he said.

“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.’"

Black Men in White Coats also works to connect potential medical students with resources that can help them enter the physician pipeline.

“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,” Dr. Okorodudu said. “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.”

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