

Ethics journal explores intersection of race and medicine

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Staff News Writer

This month's issue of *Virtual Mentor*, the AMA's online ethics journal, explores the possible benefits and harms of using race and ethnicity in medical research and patient care.

Medicine long has used race and ethnicity as proxies for physical and sociocultural characteristics associated with groups of people, based on ancestries traced to Europe, Africa or Asia. Strong evidence shows that members of these groups are treated in different ways, often contributing to documented disparities in health status among members of different races and ethnicities.

At the same time, the self-identified race of a patient can be a sound predictor of his or her health and lifespan.

Contributors to the June issue of *Virtual Mentor* take a closer look at a variety of race-related topics in medicine. Articles include:

- "Hazardous intersections: Race, ethnicity and medicine." Theme issue editor Mariam O. Fofana, a third-year medical student at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, explains that some of the most profound and enduring effects of society's racial attitudes on medicine and public health are health disparities between racial groups.
- "Mention of a patient's 'race' in clinical presentations." Thomas E. Finucane, MD, argues in his commentary that harm occurs when race is used as a proxy for characteristics stereotypically ascribed to members of a group, just as the obligatory mention of age is used to indicate the typical patient's expected health status and vitality.
- "Race: A starting place." Brooke A. Cunningham, MD, PhD, observes how those who believe that race is highly informative about underlying biology clash with those who understand race primarily as a social system of categorization.
- "Complex systems for a complex issue: Race in health research." Abdulrahman M. El-Sayed, MD, DPhil, explains how agent-based modeling and complex systems approaches enable researchers to understand why race is so strong a predictor of differences in health when they embrace such factors as inter-individual interactions, environmental influences,



reciprocity and feedback.

Visit the *Virtual Mentor* website to read more.