“The life and death stakes of racialized health inequality” – Informational Text

Read the informational text below to learn more about the history of African Americans and health care.

1. Imagine that you are African American who is enslaved and pregnant in the United States in the 1800s:

   • You wouldn’t be given any prenatal care in the nine months leading up to the birth of the baby.
   • You would likely be forced to work hard in the fields up until your baby was born, which can lead to complications in the pregnancy and low birth weight.
   • You had to carry the baby knowing that one in three enslaved infants would die before their first birthday.

   How would that change how you feel about starting a family?

2. Imagine if there was a medical emergency in your family, but doctors and nurses refused to help you because the color of your skin:

   • Until 1963, medical facilities were legally segregated and it took decades and the civil rights movement for them to be informally integrated.
   • African Americans often had to travel long distances to find medical facilities that would treat them.
   • Money for publicly-funded hospitals was divided so unequally between the races, that the black community had to independently raise funds and collect donations for all the resources to run their hospitals and health initiatives.
   • The Black Panther Party championed more medical care and health initiatives, carrying the torch of earlier medical civil rights activists.

   How would that change how you thought about medical injuries and accidents?

3. Imagine that you were an African American serving in World War II and you were not able to receive the life-saving treatment of a blood transfusion because the prevailing belief was that blacks and whites’ blood was different (in its early years, the American Red Cross refused to take blood donations from African Americans):
• Charles Drew was an African American doctor who is credited with the invention of blood transfusions and led the Red Cross’ first blood donation drives, which took place during World War II. After the Red Cross refused to accept blood from African Americans due to a false belief that their blood differed from white people, Drew resigned.

*How would you feel about fighting for your country when they deprived you of life saving treatment because of your race?*

4. Imagine the color of your skin stopped you from becoming a doctor or nurse because there no medical schools that would admit you:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Doctors by race in the United States in 2008</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
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<td>75</td>
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• African Americans had few options to receive training as doctors or nurses within the United States, but in the late 1800s, new medical schools (including Howard University College of Medicine in Washington, D.C. and Meharry Medical College in Nashville, T.N.), gave students an opportunity to learn medicine. However, few hospitals would allow African American medical students to spend time, observe or practice what they had learned. This barrier continued to put black students at a disadvantage well into the 20th century until African American physicians began opening their own hospitals and medical societies. Provident Hospital and Training School in Chicago, the first black owned-and-operated hospital in the U.S., was established in 1891. Integration during the 1960s opened more doors to African Americans, but there was still a long way to go.

*How might that change your goals to become a physician prior to segregation in medical schools becoming illegal?*

5. What if you had to worry that your doctor was not giving you the best care possible or even experimenting on you because you weren’t white? For example, what if they told you that no anesthesia was available?

• Marion Sims, a leading 19th-century physician and former president of the American Medical Association, developed many of his gynecological treatments through experiments on slave women who were not granted anesthesia.
“The Tuskegee Experiment” enrolled black male patients with syphilis and falsely told them they would receive free treatment. In reality, no effective treatment was available for syphilis at the time. The study, originally planned to be six months long, continued for 40 years with none of the men receiving medical care, even after the discovery of penicillin would have provided a treatment for the patients. In some cases, it would have saved their lives.

6. Imagine it is the 1960’s and you or someone in your family had been sterilized (a procedure that makes it physically impossible to have children) without your/their consent because they were poor and black.

- Eugenics is the study of the possibility of improving the human species by promoting reproduction of those possessing certain genetics characteristics and discouraging those with “undesirable” characteristics. This belief was held by many up until the 1940’s when the Nazis actually put it into practice with their population. In the 1930s, more than 30 states had eugenics policies that were protected by law. In a lawsuit filed by the Southern Poverty Law Center after a 12 and 14-year-old were sterilized without consent, the district court found an estimated 100,000 to 150,000 low-income people were sterilized annually under federally-funded programs.

How could you trust a health care system about family planning when they had coerced or unknowingly sterilized thousands based on their race and socioeconomic status?

Facing these unimaginable situations was a reality for African Americans in the United States for centuries and there is still ample evidence that a disparity between races in health care and the health profession continues to exist today.

Today: Despite changes to the health care system, the gap between African Americans and whites remain.

A 2012 Health Research Services study found that there is still a significant difference in life expectancy between white and African Americans in both genders, though it is more prominent in males. Researchers found that Washington, D.C. had the largest difference of mortality between the races, with African American males living 13.77 years less than their white counterparts and black women living 8.5 years less than white women.

A history of African American health activism

By the 1950s, a well-organized, African American-led civil rights movement had been waging war on racial discrimination in the United States for the better part of a century. However, despite important legal victories and a growing national sentiment against discrimination, progress toward true racial equality was limited. Active resistance to racial integration persisted
throughout all walks of life: in schools, at the workplace, in sports arenas, lunch counters, hospitals and most public places.

*The activists and the communities they worked with confronted the paradox of a profound health care neglect and desperate biomedical inclusion: Poor blacks were not only medically underserved but also overexposed to the worst jeopardies of medical practice and bio scientific research.*

-Alondra Nelson Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight Against Medical Discrimination

History shows that African Americans have been underserved when it comes to medical treatment and overrepresented in unethical medical research. Just as a systemic denial of equity in education and economic opportunity over generations has impacted the African American community, so has the scarcity of resources dedicated to medical treatment and training.

While many are familiar with the landmark Supreme Court case *Brown v Board of Education* and the groundwork it laid for future battles against inequality in the classroom, fewer know about the important work done to battle racialized inequity in health care.

In 1962, Dr. George Simkins Jr. was providing dental care to one of his patients and decided his patient needed to go to the hospital to receive serious medical treatment. But not one of the local publicly funded hospitals would take an African American patient. Simkins, a well-respected leader and committed social activist with the NAACP, sued Moses H. Cone Memorial Hospital in Feb. 1962.

16 years earlier, President Harry Truman had pledged to prioritize the the improvement of the nation’s hospital system. Congress passed the Hill-Burton Act in order to set the project in motion and within its mandates declared that “separate but equal facilities” would be allowed. This led to discrimination and inequity in medical treatment on every front. Finally, in 1963, a federal circuit court declared that segregated, "separate but equal" facilities were unconstitutional and struck down that portion of the Hill–Burton Act.

Many people contributed to the fight to end the historic inequality in health care. The civil rights movement used a three-pronged approach:

1. Institution building – African Americans funded hospitals in underserved black communities, established institutions of learning to train African American health professionals (doctors, nurses, etc.) and implemented public health initiatives.

2. Integrationism - complete desegregation of medical institutions, professional institutions, hospitals, clinics, medical schools and training facilities. Additionally, they would fight for comparable and shared facilities and services.
3. Disrupt the status quo of the “politics of knowledge” – despite no credible medical evidence to back up claims of white racial superiority, there was still a thriving culture of racism.

Three people/groups who made major contributions to progress in health care for African Americans

- Charles Drew
- W. Montague Cobb
- The Black Panther Party

*Please use the videos and documents to learn more about each person/group.*

*Title is a quote from Dr. Alondra Nelson’s work, Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight Against Medical Discrimination.*