

RACISM IS A PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS

As an OBGYN physician practicing in Columbus, Ohio I have seen the health disparities and inequities that People of color face. I would like to encourage you to vote yes on SCR 14 which would treat racism as a public health crisis.

Why is racism a public health crisis? Unfortunately, even as physicians we may treat people differently based on our own implicit biases. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2017), for example, showed that 32% of African Americans experienced racial discrimination when going to a doctor or health clinic and 22% avoided seeking care out of concern about discrimination.

In our state, the Ohio Department of Health reported that as of April 30, 2020, 24% of coronavirus patients were African American even though they only make up 13% of the state's population. Between 2008 and 2016 the pregnancy related mortality ratio was 11.5 for white women and 29.5 for black women. During that time black women accounted for 17% of women giving birth but accounted for 34% of pregnancy related deaths in Ohio.

There are two main reasons for this discrepancy according to Dr Christopher Lewis, a family practice physician at UC Health in Cincinnati. The first is that African Americans are more likely to have preexisting conditions like hypertension and diabetes that make them more vulnerable to coronavirus. The second more critical reason are social determinants of health such as inequities in economic stability, education, physical environment, food and access to health care.

The day to day experiences of African Americans that include being unfairly stopped by police officers, discriminatory treatment when trying to rent or buy a house or even participating in social events create physiological responses that lead to premature aging.

African American physicians have even told us on a personal level that their heart races every time they see a police officer even when they are not doing anything wrong.

By recognizing that racism is a public health crisis we can start the process of affecting change in Ohio. As legislators and law makers you can pass laws that give African Americans equal access to safe housing, health care and education. I am asking you to pass SCR14 and to urge your fellow legislators to do the same.

Anita Somani MD – Past President of the Columbus Medical Association