

Section on Neonatal-Perinatal Medicine on Racism in the United States: What You Can Do Now

The roots of the social and economic inequities that profoundly impact the health and well-being of black people in this country were set into place long before the founding of our country. Although we have made some progress as a nation, systemic racism persists and is a powerful social determinant of health that relentlessly counters the quest of each and every black person for the inalienable rights of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”.

The recent tragedies and loss of Ahmaud Arber, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd are just three examples of countless black lives lost due to racism and senseless violence that must no longer be tolerated. Institutional racism that leads to racial health disparities and premature death presents a public health crisis as grave and alarming as COVID-19.

We also recognize the overwhelming and disproportionate impact that recent tragedies of racial violence have on our black colleagues. We acknowledge the psychological and physical burden this places on you. We see you. We hear you. You matter. We commit to creating a safe space to have authentic dialogue to effect change. We know you are hurting, and we stand in solidarity with you.

Similar to the safety culture mantra of “see something, say something” we *CAN NOT* remain silent. We have an obligation to educate ourselves, our neonatal colleagues and multidisciplinary team members; officials at local, state, federal levels; the public, and our patients’ families. As experts in child health, we know racism harms the physical and mental health of our children. There is much work to be done, but first we just need to be comfortable “being uncomfortable” talking about racism. It is not enough to not be racist, we need to be vocal anti-racist advocates and allies to create meaningful change.

The Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) is not immune to the deadly nexus between race and health. NICUs are often staffed by team members that do not mirror the racial or cultural diversity of our patients. As neonatologists, we also recognize that racism affects our patients and families well before birth. Every day, we see the effects of health outcome disparities with higher rates of morbidity and mortality in African American mothers and babies. “Racism harms children's health, starting from before they are born,” AAP President Dr. Sally Goza said. “A growing body of research supports this, and we cannot ignore the impact.” It is our responsibility to advocate for our patients, families, and colleagues, and ensure they are treated with respect. This begins with us as individuals. Join us in the challenge to commit to at least one concrete action item to make a difference by opposing racism and hate. Schedule time in the weeks and months ahead to follow-up, reflect, and hold ourselves and each other accountable.

Please join the Section on Neonatal-Perinatal Medicine in uniting against racism and discrimination in all forms, and by loudly denouncing racially motivated violence, systemic

racism, and healthcare disparities. We will intentionally incorporate these actions and utilize a racial equity lens into our daily work in the NICU.

The Section on Neonatal-Perinatal Medicine is committed to addressing systemic barriers, bias, racial/ethnic health disparities and racism in the field of neonatology. Racism threatens the health of our colleagues, our patients and families, our communities, and our future. Martin Luther King Jr said, “In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.” We are learning together on this journey, and admit that we do not have all the answers. We are willing to falter along the way, but we are unwilling to remain silent. We have an opportunity and an obligation to speak up and take meaningful action against racism today and every day until this scourge is banished.

Call to Action

1. **Engage in authentic conversation.** Listen! Acknowledge, listen, learn, unlearn, be receptive, recognize that we “don’t know what we don’t know,” and create a safe space for continued reflection, discussion, and vulnerability. Read and learn from this article: [Your Black Colleagues May Look Like They’re Okay — Chances Are They’re Not.](#)
2. **Identify your own biases.** Implicit bias is universal. This is a great time to test (or retest) your unconscious association. Try it out here: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>
3. **Create a culturally safe NICU.** You can focus on the mental and emotional stress that patients, families, colleagues, and communities are experiencing in these uncertain and traumatic times. [The Burden of Having Ears That Can Hear](#) (written by neonatologist Dr. Tamorah Lewis, MD, PhD)
4. **Make a personal commitment to educate yourself.** The first step is to commit to being actively anti-racist and to make the effort to educate ourselves. This is of fundamental importance for real and durable change. Do not rely on black and brown colleagues for our education on social justice news and initiatives. Do the research to understand current events, using data from reliable sources. You may start with a list of [Anti-Racism Resources](#) by Sarah Sophie Flicker and Alyssa Klein.
5. **Speak Up Against Racism.** Silence speaks volumes. It is time to get comfortable with being uncomfortable. Watch the [Leverage Your Privilege](#) challenge.
 - Speak up to elected officials to reduce disparities and advance social justice
 - Speak up to colleagues and family about the extra burden they are carrying
 - Speak up for diversity in recruitment, on committees, editorial review boards, in research publications (include mothers and children of color, effects of social determinants of health on outcomes)
6. **Call for Change.** Caring for children CANNOT exist without social justice and reform. Lead with humility and be willing to give up or share power to allow the communities’ knowledge and experiences to guide every change strategy. The 2019 AAP Policy statement, [The Impact of Racism on Child and Adolescent Health](#) provides you with concrete actions to take in clinical care, education, advocacy, research. Use your privilege, influence, and network to affect change. Racism is not a Black people problem. Racism is

a human problem. Sustainable change requires advocacy from each and every one of us. Failure to act is an unacceptable endorsement of the status quo.

- Make racial equity a priority.
- Make a strong public statement.
- Support Black-owned businesses and social justice causes.
- Ask your institutions/leadership to publicly condemn systemic racism.
- Call for creation of Diversity and Inclusion or Anti-Racism work groups or task forces in your places of work.
- Advocate strongly for widespread dissemination of racism and health equity education, prioritization, support and funding of health equity research on all levels.

Resources:

[An Rx for a Racist Healthcare System](#) (podcast)

[Talking to Children about Racism: The Time Is Now](#) (HealthyChildren.org)

[HBR Businesses Must Take Meaningful Action against Racism](#)