

OPINION

Morris: Memphis needs more Black doctors

By G. Scott Morris, Special to The Daily Memphian

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Black Men in White Coats hosted its annual STEM youth summit at Baptist Health and Sciences Center in the Medical District on Feb. 22. From right to left: Dr. Anwar Isabell, Dr. Deaunte Thompson, Dr. W. Bernard Abrams, Jr., Dr. Albert F. Gruber, Dr. Christopher J. McClare and Dr. Lou Arrindell posed for a photo at the event. (Ziggy Mack/Special to The Daily Memphian)

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SPECIAL TO THE DAILY MEMPHIAN

G. Scott Morris



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having a guest column considered by The Daily Memphian, email Eric Barnes.

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Memphis is a Black city. About 60% of our population is Black.

What we don't have is enough Black doctors: among more than 2,500 physicians in Memphis, only about 250 are Black.

About 60% of our people but only 10% of our doctors. Why is that?

Downtown Memphis Commission sets new design guidelines

In 1900, Dr. Myles Link founded the University of West Tennessee in Jackson. This was a Black university that taught medicine, dentistry and law. In 1907, Dr. Link moved the school to Memphis. In the next 16 years, it graduated 155 Black doctors.

In 1910, however, the Flexner Report, which assessed medical schools in America and Canada, concluded the U.S. did not need medical schools focused on training African Americans. As a result, the school closed in 1923.

At that time, there were 40 Black doctors practicing in Memphis. There would not be another Black student graduate from medical school in Memphis until 1964 when Alvin H. Crawford became the first Black graduate from the University of Tennessee Health Science Center.

He went on to have a distinguished career throughout three decades as pediatric orthopedic surgeon in Cincinnati, not Memphis.

It took Dr. Ed Reed who graduated from Meharry Medical College in 1955 coming to Memphis in 1962 to set up his surgical practice to be the first new Black physician to call Memphis home.

Regional One CEO plans options in case state money doesn't come through

In the 1960s, capable Black students went to be trained at Meharry in Nashville and Howard University in Washington, D.C. Most of them never returned. By the mid-1960s, there were only 12 Black doctors in Memphis.

What does it take to be accepted into medical school? There are four primary criteria: your undergraduate grades, your Medical College Admission Test scores, clinical experience and your interview.

In a world where merit is supposed to determine acceptance to schools, this might seem equitable. However, 75% of medical school students come from the top two household-income groups, according to the Association of American Medical Colleges.

Applicants from the lowest income group, less than \$50,000 per year, are half as likely to be accepted as those from the highest income bracket. Black students in med school also skew toward higher income brackets. This holds true regardless of race or ethnicity.

Preparing for medical school is hard. Students who want to go to medical school are groomed from an early age. They have tutors throughout their education. If they don't do well on the MCAT, a tutor for four months to prepare to retake the test costs \$5,000. If a student's parent works at Wendy's, where does that money come from?

Guest column: Repealing outmoded law could benefit patients, providers, community

And then there is the elusive issue known as "clinical experience." This is time spent shadowing multiple physicians in the office or the hospital to understand what the job is really like.

Students from wealthy families normally have their parents call a family friend and ask a favor for the child to spend time in the office or the hospital. Who is a single mother who works at Wendy's supposed to call for such clinical experiences?

The journey to become a doctor is arduous for anyone, but for Black students, the road is often steeper and lonelier. Systemic barriers begin early with under-resourced schools, fewer mentorship opportunities and financial obstacles.

Even those who clear these hurdles face a medical-education system that often question whether they belong.

We must confront an uncomfortable truth: The lack of Black doctors is not due to a lack of talent or drive. It's a consequence of long-standing inequities that continue to shape who gets to wear the white coat.

Sanford: A Delta newspaper and an assault on freedom of the press

A common misconception is doctors must be the smartest person in the room. In my experience, the best physicians are those who are deeply committed to learning and who care profoundly about their patients.

Yet for too long the medical pipeline has been shaped by narrow definitions of aptitude and rigid admissions processes that fail to account for the resilience and compassion required to care for diverse communities.

The recent Supreme Court decision striking down race-conscious admissions policies has made an already difficult problem worse.

Medical schools can no longer explicitly recruit Black students despite overwhelming evidence representation in medicine matters.

Research shows Black patients have better health outcomes when treated by Black physicians. Shared lived experiences foster trust, improve communication and ultimately save lives.

County Commission approves Regional One land purchase despite \$240K increase

This is not a matter of preference; it is a matter of public health.

This year's first-year class at the University of Tennessee Health Science Center medical school has only three Black students. Three.

So how do we fix this?

First, we must expand pathways for Black students long before they apply to medical school.

That means investing in STEM programs in predominantly Black schools, funding scholarships and offering mentorships.

Beyond the wheelchair: Local clinic helps bridge accessibility gap

Recently The Daily Memphian ran an article about the organization named Black Men in White Coats. This organization was founded nationally in 2015 by Dr. Dale Okorodudu.

We have a strong chapter here in Memphis to inspire young Black people to explore careers in health care, but we need more programs like this.

Recently the Student National Medical Association met in Memphis and brought hundreds of future Black doctors to Memphis.

Let us pray they come back to practice in Memphis.

At Church Health, we run a gap-year program in which 17 students work in our clinic for a year. They get an abundance of clinical experience, and we help improve MCAT scores.

Mother of inmate who died at 201 Poplar files lawsuit

I believe if we could identify 10 Black students who grew up in Memphis who go on to medical school and then come back to practice in Memphis once they are physicians, we could change the trajectory of the city.

Ten is a doable number. But it will not be easy. It will take a village. It will take our faith communities to identify students and then walk alongside them as they grow up.

We must not let points of leakage allow them to slip away. This is again about growing physicians. No one said it would be easy.

There are currently four medical schools working in Memphis. You thought there was only one. I believe the current chancellor at UT is committed to the challenge, but attracting students to a school that has only three Black students in this year's first-year class isn't easy.

However, it is easy for qualified students to go elsewhere. They need to *want* to come to Memphis.

'Excellence and achievement': UTHSC earns prestigious research designation

Baptist Hospital has started a new osteopathic medical school. There are 15 Black students in their first-year class, and most of them are from the Mid-South. Baptist seems committed to the cause.

Then, Meharry Medical College based in Nashville and one of four historically Black medical schools has put its toe into Memphis with students rotating through a variety of clinics associated with Methodist Hospital.

At Church Health, we have Meharry students with us every month. The drawback here is these students are almost all from somewhere else in the country and are unlikely to return to Memphis.

But maybe their experiences here will pull them back. We will pray.

Lastly, Arkansas State now has a medical school where one-third of their students spend a significant amount of time in Memphis. I have yet to meet a Black student from there, but I am sure there are some.

Health Department pushes for HIV testing in hospital ERs

I know it is somewhat crazy for an old white doctor to care so deeply about this issue. But I care with all my heart about Memphis.

I believe raising our own children to be physicians in this city will be transformative for how we see ourselves. It will impact our economy, but even more, it impacts the way we see who we are as a city.

We should all be invested in this cause. It will help make us the city we aspire to be. And we will be healthier because the whole village took care of these children and raised them to take care of us.

TOPICS

G. SCOTT MORRIS **BLACK DOCTORS** **BLACK MEN IN WHITE COATS**
