

FSU College of Medicine students explore race in the health-care industry

Byron Dobson , Democrat senior writer Published 7:34 p.m. ET Jan. 19, 2017

FSU student chapter of WhiteCoats4BlackLives has goal of raising awareness of racism in health care



(Photo: Mike Ewen/Democrat)

Last summer six Florida State medical school students formed a local chapter of WhiteCoats4Blacklives. They wanted to highlight how the issues of race affect the dispensing and receipt of medical care.

On Friday, they are hosting John Hoberman, a noted social historian, professor and author of "Black and Blue: The Origins and Consequences of Medical Racism."

Hoberman's appearance culminates a week-long series of events. The student organization says Hoberman's presentation seeks to "foster understanding of potential barriers facing health care faculty, students and staff," while illuminating "the importance of supporting the advancement of minority groups in

medical academic institutions."

Presentations held this week have attracted large crowds. Guest speakers drawn from FSU and the community have addressed racial terminology, the origins of implicit bias and privilege and the historical context of race in America and its impact on medical studies.

A lunch session addressing community advocacy also is planned for Friday.

WhiteCoats4BlackLives was created nationally by medical students in 2014 as an advocacy organization focused on raising awareness of racism as a public health concern, to end racial discrimination in health care and to prepare medical students to become advocates for racial justice. Medicine has long been plagued by the chronic disparities in black and white health outcomes.

This week's series, titled "Racism Awareness Week" is the first public event created by the FSU chapter. The series was the brainchild of founders Zedeena Fisher, Bryno Gay, Acton Pifer, Eric Walker, Michael Morgan and Nadia Akhiyat.



Zedeena Fisher, a second year student in the FSU College of Medicine. (Photo: Byron Dobson/Democrat)

"The Racism Awareness series was our idea and with that idea, we wanted to keep it sustainable so we put it under the WhiteCoats4Black Lives initiative," said Fisher, a second-year medical student from Ocala. She plans to work in family practice in a rural community.

"The series was the first step in many steps that we are trying to take to deconstruct the social stigmas as well as biases that are associated with race," said Gay, a second-year medical student from Fort Lauderdale.

"We are not specifically talking white versus black or black lives in general," Gay said. "We are talking about race as a multispectral approach. Racism itself is not just black or white. There are existing layers when you talk about race and racism."

Gay and Fisher said this week's series is designed to further understand race and racism, to get people comfortable in discussing race and to create awareness of racial sensitivity and understanding in the teaching and practice of medicine.

"There are social constructs put in place that limit a section of the population, mainly people of color, from equal access to health care, among other things," Gay said.

To get to the root of race and how its impacts health care, the public first must understand it's an issue. Avoidance only leads to perceptions and practices that are unfair to a significant segment of the community.



Bryno Gay, FSU College of Medicine (Photo: Florida State University file)

"People are put in these bins that categorize them based on the way light refracts against their skin and we allow this to create a micro-environment that reduces the value of a person, more so, with people of color," Gay said.

Gay and Fisher said it is important to incorporate a better understanding of racism and racial disparities in the medical school curriculums to better prepare future physicians early in the learning process.

"This whole medical racism starts in the medical field because of certain gaps in knowledge," Fisher said. "It trickles down the line to perpetuate health disparities."

The students said FSU's College of Medicine – whose mission to prepare doctors who will practice in rural and underserved communities – offers an environment where these issues can be addressed.

"We do have professors who acknowledge and promote the idea of diversity," Gay said. "This school prides itself on that."

Dean John P. Fogarty said issues raised this week are important in light of the recent presidential election.

"The events of the past year and the results of a divisive election have been felt by every sector of our population, including our medical students, faculty and staff here at FSU," Fogarty said. "We have a wonderful group of students who decided to take an active role in addressing the complexity of this past year by sponsoring a series of educational programs for us and the community to begin the dialogue so necessary for true change."

Gay said the WhiteCoats4BlackLives organization is open and not a group advocating solely for the benefit of black people.

"It doesn't matter if you are white, black, Hispanic, Asian or Native-American," said Gay, who plans to specialize in oncology/hematology. "It recognizes the limitations put on people of color, period."

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