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Rashad Sullivan, MD  Follow
Jun 5 · 5 min read  ★
Drawing by my 16 year old daughter Aubrianna Sullivan, after we had to discuss racism in America and the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd and the actions of Amy Cooper.

It’s Subtle Racism in America That is Causing the Most Damage to Black Lives!

As a black orthopedic surgeon, I am devastated by the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd but it’s the actions of Amy Cooper that keeps me awake at night. The act of weaponizing one’s whiteness to put black people in their place is a heinous and racist act that occurs way more frequently than us being murdered by the police. Her actions are the foundation of systemic racism to its core and the reason it prevails. They open the door that allows black people to experience the uneven hand of law enforcement brutality and blatant discrimination in this country. The videos of white citizens policing black people who appear to have no citizenship is a perceived normal aggression in this country. It’s the reason why Travis and Gregory McMichael felt empowered and even obligated to question Ahmaud Arbery’s belonging in their neighborhood, furthermore it’s why we watch countless videos of black people being denied entrance or removal from their hotels, local coffee shops, and even their homes in the year of 2020.

Somewhere along the way, ownership of this country was given to its white citizens. That’s a hard truth but I assure you, it’s a lived reality. Justice John Marshall Harlan admitted that much in his dissent to the Supreme Court Ruling in Plessy v. Ferguson in 1896 “The white race deems itself to be the dominant race in this country. And so it is in prestige, in achievements, in education, in wealth and in power. So, I doubt not, it will continue to be for all time if it remains true to its great heritage and holds fast to the principles of constitutional liberty.” It was this decision that heralded the Jim Crow era. This ownership is the privilege of every white person who wishes to use it and it’s ingrained in the fabric of the American social economic ladder. Racism is the tool of choice to advance white societal norms and suppress black societal gains. You see at any given time there are some mis-informed, culturally insensitive and even racist white people making decisions on behalf of black people that could have lasting effects. #truth. It could be in our government both locally and nationally, our jobs, our schools, colleges, banks, hospitals, everywhere! The most sinister truth about the “Calling
Karen’s” and the “You don’t belong here Kens” is that they are co-workers, supervisors, department heads, vice presidents, ceo’s, government officials and even doctors!

As an African American physician, I’m am well aware that systemic racism is as pervasive in medicine, as it is in law enforcement, education and government. You don’t have to look hard to see it. It exists in the disproportionate effect of COVID-19 on the African American community as well as the laundry list of healthcare disparities that increase our risk of contracting it. If you look at healthcare disparities outlined by the World Health Organization, you will see that those disparities exist when the healthcare outcomes of other races are measured in comparison to their white peers. This problem is more openly discussed and debated; but what about black trainees in medical education. Institutionalized racism has just as much of an impact on their well-being and ability to become competent and well-trained physicians. In 2017 the AAMC issued a statement that the decreasing number of African American males getting accepted into medical school has become a national healthcare crisis. This is multi-factorial but systemic racism is one of the reasons cited. Literature also supports that African Americans in medical school, and residency, disproportionately experience racism and retaliation for reporting racism while training when compared to their white peers.

It’s hard not to imagine that the Amy Coopers in our society have been weaponizing their whiteness to keep blacks from gaining opportunities that they themselves would otherwise feel entitled to. It’s this pervasive and subtle mentality that, “we — black people — don’t belong” that actually does the most damage to people of color in this country. The sad reality is that their implicit “racist” bias leads to explicit racial consequences. It keeps us from progressing as a collective community. As a black person, could you trust an Amy Cooper to manage your healthcare, give you a fair evaluation on your job, or to promote you when necessary? Could you afford her teaching and treating your children unfairly? Would you feel confident if she were sitting in a jury, or even on the judge’s bench or the police officer in your community? Unfortunately, there is no camera to capture the moments of prejudice that happens behind closed doors and affects the everyday lives of black people. We must put a stop to this subtle racism to get lasting and effective change. Because if we do, we will no longer embolden and empower white America to weaponize their whiteness to suppress our black voices.
I wholeheartedly believe, that you cannot have a meaningful discussion about diversity, inclusion, equity if you don’t talk about accountability. Silence is acceptance! As a white person in America you may not feel that you are a racist but if you sit in silence when you see someone black being treated unfairly, more harshly, and denied the right to have access to what is accessible to you (as a white person), then it is more likely that you contribute to the racist system that harbors this sense of inequality and injustice. In fact you may very well still feel that you are not a racist person knowing this truth, but you have to at least acknowledge you are a benefactor of this racist system. I am grateful, and have been hopeful to see my white colleagues kneeling but it will be your actions behind close doors that bring about lasting change and healing. We must all work together to change the world that we live in for the betterment of all humanity. So I implore my fellow white Americans and physicians to hold themselves accountable, if they want to help us dismantle systemic racism in our country.

Racism  Medicine  BlackLivesMatter  Accountability  Discrimination