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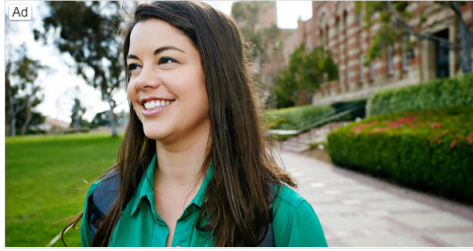
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COMMENTARY

# Commentary: I experienced racism at UCSD medical school 50 years ago. There's still work to do.



The Medical Education and Telemedicine Center at the UCSD School of Medicine. Below, Dr. Hood, one of the first Black students to graduate from the medical school, talks about racism he encountered in the 1970s. (Peggy Peattie)

By RODNEY G. HOOD  
JULY 7, 2020 | 3:45 PM

As one of the first Black medical students to graduate and complete a residency at UC San Diego medical school and the UC San Diego Health system in the early 1970s, it is painful to see the lack of progress in the elimination of structural racism in medical schools and the health system.

I grew up in the Black neighborhood of Roxbury, Mass., where I frequently was called the n-word whenever I ventured into non-Black areas of Boston. As a young boy, I asked my mother, Evelyn Hood, who was a very proud Black woman, why they called me the n-word. She told me, "Well, Ronnie, that's because they are jealous of you! Their ignorance makes you better because you know what they know plus what you know. They are the real n-words."

As a young Black boy educated in America, I was taught science and history through a Eurocentric perspective that stressed White accomplishments and ignored Black achievement. As I later learned true history outside of the traditional educational system, I now consider this biased traditional education as "his story."

Upon applying to UC San Diego medical school, I was invited to give in women



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Upon applying to UC San Diego medical school, I was invited to five in-person interviews but later learned that most students only had two or three interviews. I was told that I was “special” and being considered for entrance into the new school’s second medical school class, but I was being considered for a “special” program for Black and Brown students that would take five years rather than four years to complete.

I felt insulted with this offer. I retorted, “Thank you for your consideration, but I have successfully completed six years of pharmacy and graduate school that included most of the first-year medical school courses at UC San Francisco. Do you have a three-year program?” The interviewer was surprised at my bold and confident response.

During my seven years of medical school and residency training, I was exposed to numerous racial microinsults and macroaggressions, including further condescension from professors as well as White patients telling my resident or attending professor that they preferred not to have a n-word as their doctor.

To the credit of my teachers, they simply told them that they had no choice.

However, one of the greatest insults that I experienced was in 1971 as a second-year medical student. I and other Black and Brown students were forced to endure a demeaning lecture on the superiority of White intellect. Against my strong protest to the dean and anyone who would listen, a behavioral health psychology professor gave a lecture on the intellectual inferiority of Blacks based upon the Eurocentric IQ test, with no opposing views heard. I was told that the professor was in his rights because of scientific enlightenment and freedom of speech.

This lecture was based upon the beliefs and writings of two white supremacists, psychologist Arthur Jansen, who was then at UC Berkeley, and Stanford University professor and physicist William Shockley, that Blacks’ IQs were lower than Whites. The lecture postulated that since IQ is inherited, spending resources educating Blacks would be wasted, and suggested Blacks should focus on less academic professions.

We have arrived at the urgency of now. The COVID-19 pandemic and current Black Lives Matter movement with the murder of George Floyd have exposed structural racism in medicine and the justice system. The multiethnic, mostly young protesters who are demanding transformative change give me hope that systemic changes may eventually take place, rather than incremental reforms.

I am pleased to see the advocacy of the UC San Diego medical students led by Black students and the positive response from UC San Diego leadership to their demands to embark on anti-racism transformation with the health education and health care system. I am excited that after 50 years working with my beloved alma mater UC San Diego, blind spots appear to be finally fading with fewer people living in the 51st state of denial.

Can we change the culture of ignorance, denial and apathy that protects structural racism? In my experience, culture will trump structural policy changes most of the time, but with the current national and world awakening, I remain cautiously optimistic. It took me decades of maturing before I truly understood my mother’s wise words.

**Hood, M.D.**, is the president and founder of the Multicultural Health Foundation and the past president of the National Medical Association. He’s been practicing medicine in San Diego for more than 20 years and lives in La Mesa.

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