Community-Physician Education Partnerships: One Strategy to Eliminate Racial/Ethnic Health Disparities

Commentary on "Teaching Physicians-in-Training to Address Racial Disparities in Health: A Hospital-Community Partnership"

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Respectful and mutually beneficial educational partnerships between community members and physicians are an essential component of emerging national strategies to eliminate racial/ethnic health disparities. These partnerships often provide a combination of educational sessions, critical dialogue, and skill building in community practice settings for the purpose of physician training. Educational sessions in which community members teach by describing their lived experiences at the unique and complex interfaces of race/ethnicity, health, history, and the urgent conditions of contemporary daily life create a rich context for physicians to understand the meaning of health disparities for individuals and community groups. Community members are experts in describing and teaching the profound life consequences of health disparities as well as naming the skills, tools, and resources that must be cultivated and shared in order to eliminate health disparities affecting their particular community.

Well-constructed teaching partnerships also offer formal settings for ongoing dialogue between the physician and community member participants so that misinformation can be carefully untangled and long-held erroneous beliefs about racial/ethnic groups or physician practices can be dismantled. Encouraged and sustained dialogue of this kind has the potential to change physicians' knowledge base, behaviors, and practice patterns. In the best dialogue settings, physicians can also learn to acknowledge and honor the irreplaceable role of community members as equal partners in the difficult work of learning how to eliminate health disparities. Multilevel community-physician educational partnerships, in which physicians become both students of and partners with the community, offer the promise of community-physician problem solving. Partnerships like the one described by Jacobs et al.[1] are examples that lift our spirits and sharpen our resolve that it is indeed possible to eliminate racial/ethnic health disparities in our lifetime.

REFERENCE

1. Jacobs EA, Kohrman C, Lemon M, Vickers DL. Teaching physicians-in-training to address racial disparities in health: a hospital-community partnership. Public Health Rep 2003;118:349-56.

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