

The LUNA Project resource on Medical Racism

Breaking down what Medical Racism is, the way in which racism in society affects the health of BIPoC, and the way in which the healthcare system is failing BIPoC in poorer treatment and outcomes. At the end we have suggestions of other resources to check out, because whilst this can be the start of you thinking about medical racism, it should not be the end.

What is Medical Racism?

Medical racism is the systematic and wide-spread racism against people of color within the medical system. It includes both the racism in our society that affects the health of BIPoC, the biases held by healthcare workers against BIPoC which affects the quality of treatment and outcomes for BIPoC, and the underrepresentation of people in positions of power in the healthcare system.

Medical racism is systemic around the world, but this resource will specifically focus on medical racism in the UK. It will look at the racism in society that affects the health of BIPoC, quality of treatment, outcomes, and places to learn more

How does racism affect health?

Racism is a well-documented cause of health inequalities. We can understand this as being for a number of different reasons, one of these reasons being the way that racism feeds into different factors that we understand to affect health.

For example, housing and economic stability are both understood to affect a person's health, and BIPoC are more likely to have poorer experiences with these.

A second way in which racism affects BIPoC's health is the stress and social exclusion brought on a daily basis. As we are learning more about the effect of stress on the body we are beginning to understand just how damaging this is.

We can also understand racism to affect BIPoC's health because of bias's held by healthcare professionals, and the health care system being its own institution which has its own systemic racism at every level.

The impacts over a lifetime of these interacting factors are huge, figures from England show that (excluding stats of Disabled people), life expectancy at birth for PoC is lower than for white British people.

Lower Quality of Treatment and Poorer outcomes

So, we have just established that BIPoC are more likely to need healthcare than their white counterparts. In fact they are more likely to experience ill health earlier in life. It may feel obvious to you reading this that this calls for a healthcare system that works especially well for BIPoC, but sadly this couldn't be further from the reality.

Medical racism can look different in different areas of the healthcare system, so let's have a look at some specific examples...

Specific Example: Obstetrics and Gynaecology

Obstetrics and Gynaecology is a field that was built off racist practices (we aren't going to dive into this here, but have a google). This is a history it fails to recognise, which is especially unforgivable when it is still failing Black women, with the most devastating consequences.

Today:

- Black women are 2 times as likely to have a stillborn baby that white women in comparable circumstances. (RCOG, 2020)
- Black women are 5 times more likely to die in childbirth, and six weeks postpartum than white women.(RCOG, 2020)
- During pregnancy, Black women are less likely to receive pain relief and to feel they had been understood and spoken to with kindness. (Henderson et al, 2013)

Specific Example: Mental Health Services

- Black people are three to five times more likely to be diagnosed and admitted to hospital for schizophrenia, more than any other group. HOWEVER In follow up, they were less likely to recover from symptoms than white patients (38 percent compared to 55.5 percent). lack African and African Caribbean patients were also found to be less likely to be in employment than white patients during their follow up period. (Morgan et al 2017, in the Racial Disparities in Mental Health Review 2019)
- Asylum seekers and refugees are more likely to have poor mental health as a result of experiences of trauma and violence, as well as post migration experiences. Research suggests that asylum seekers are five times more likely to have mental health needs than the general population but less likely to receive support. (the Racial Disparities in Mental Health Review 2019)
- "Once in contact with mental health services, Black and minority ethnic people are more likely to report harsh experiences of services and poorer outcomes" ((Synergi, 2018, in the Racial Disparities in Mental Health Review 2019)
- Research in 2013 indicated that black people detained under mental health legislation are 29% more likely to be forcibly restrained than white patients.

We Must Do Better

We have barely scratched the surface here, medical racism is deeply rooted in our healthcare system and something needs to change. Use this as a springboard, don't let this be the last time you think or talk about medical racism today- start a conversation with someone else about it, look at the places to keep learning. If you work in a healthcare setting, have this conversation in

your workplace, ask your line manager what is being done. We must do better, and that is on all of us.

Places to keep learning...

Podcasts

White Homework- 020: Medical Racism

Black History Year- What You Need To Know About Medical Racism

Instagram

@chronicallybrown does incredible work highlighting the need for conversations around healthcare for PoC

@youlookokaytome did an IGTV on their experiences of medical racism.

Books

Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Gynaecology- Deirdre Cooper Owens

Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight against Medical Discrimination by Alondra Nelson

Reports

<https://raceequalityfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/mental-health-report-v5-2.pdf>

References

- <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/workforce-and-business/workforce-diversity/nhs-workforce/latest>
- <https://www.bmj.com/content/368/bmj.m571>
- <https://www.bmj.com/content/368/bmj.m484>
- <http://blog.policy.manchester.ac.uk/featured/2015/01/how-racism-harms-health/>
- <https://www.rcog.org.uk/en/news/rcog-calls-for-government-action-to-tackle-racial-inequalities-in-womens-healthcare/https://bmcpregnancychildbirth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1471-2393-13-196>
- <https://irr.org.uk/research/statistics/health/>
- <https://raceequalityfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/mental-health-report-v5-2.pdf>

