A History Book for the Future

The Black Panther Party's health care program

September 5, 2012 By Laura Whitehorn

We dodged a bullet when the Supreme Court affirmed a core section of the Affordable Care Act in June, but huge questions remain. For one, the court said states do not have to expand Medicaid, leaving many poor people without coverage. And don't get us started on the future of health care if the Republicans win the White House.

Black communities are particularly affected by limits on health care availability. So Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight Against Medical Discrimination, by Alondra Nelson (University of Minnesota Press), arrives right on time.

Nelson describes the Black Panther Party's community-run health care clinics and programs from 1966 to 1980. One achievement was to publicize and institute screenings for sickle-cell anemia in the early 1970s. Others included teaming up with local doctors and training community members as health care workers to provide care in underserved areas.

Nelson also recounts how the Black Panthers confronted another side of medical discrimination: the ways that researchers used and abused African Americans (think: Tuskegee, Henrietta Lacks).

Along with useful history, Body and Soul provides a guide to what communities can do today to get—and stay—healthy.

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