

HBCU Encourages Black Med Students to Consider Becoming Transplant Surgeons

A Tennessee medical school aims to reduce organ transplant disparities and dispel long-standing myths about organ donation.

October 31, 2023 By Laura Schmidt

A program at a Tennessee medical school encourages Black and other minority students to pursue careers in the [organ transplant](#) field.

With support from Tennessee Donor Services (TDS), the novel program at Meharry Medical College (MMC), a historically Black college in Nashville, aims to address transplant [inequity](#) and gain the trust of patients of color.

“There are very few transplant surgeons who look like me,” MMC president James Hildreth, PhD, MD, told [The Associated Press \(AP\)](#).

There are more than 100,000 people on the transplant waiting list in the United States, according to [Penn Medicine](#). Black people make up 28% of the waiting list for all organs but account for only about 16% of deceased donors. Although one deceased organ donor can save up to eight lives, only 3 in 1,000 people die in a way that allows for organ donation.

What’s more, only 5.5% of transplant surgeons and less than 7% of kidney specialists are Black, according to the AP.

Six MMC students spent the summer learning about the many steps involved in the transplant process, including finding eligible donors and recovering organs and matching them to recipients [near and far](#). The program also teaches students how to tactfully discuss donation with grieving families.

One student involved in the program, Teresa Belledent, told the AP that she was worried about becoming emotional seeing donor’s faces, but TDS experts calmed her nerves.

“I’m able to feel sad and honor this person...and be able to focus on the act of helping other people,” Belledent said.

Historical mistrust of the medical system among members of minority communities has long been a barrier both to organ donation and transplantation. Belledent said her mother, for example, told her not to becoming an organ donor when she got her driver's license because doctors don't try as hard to save the life of a registered donor.

"Now that I've seen the process, it's crazy to even think about," Belledent said. "In the ICU [intensive care unit], no one's looking through stuff and trying to find your license, look for the [organ donor] heart on there."

Belledent decided to consider specializing in transplant surgery "because I like the idea of being able to give someone a second chance."

To learn more, click [#Organ Donation](#) or [#Organ Transplant](#). There, you'll find headlines such as "[100-Year-Old Liver Transplants](#)," "[Double Lung Transplants May Be Rare, but They Just Saved Two Lives](#)" and "[Congress Considers Easing Regulations on Air Transport of Donated Organs](#)."

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