Marcella Nunez-Smith to Lead Effort to Reduce Health Care Disparities

Nunez-Smith will address COVID-19's disproportionate impact on minority communities.

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President Joe Biden has tapped Marcella Nunez-Smith, MD, MHS, a cochair of his COVID-19 advisory board and an associate professor of internal medicine, public health and management at Yale University, to lead a federal task force charged with reducing racial inequities in COVID-19 testing, diagnosis and treatment, reports Yale News.

Black people, Latinos and Indigenous people account for a disproportionate number of COVID-19 deaths in the United States for reasons that range from the economic to the environmental. The stark disparity has led to scrutiny of the fields of medicine and health care and prompted calls for the federal government to prioritize individuals in these population groups for vaccination.

Nunez-Smith is no stranger to the tragic consequences of structural racism. When she was a child, her father, Moleto "Bishop" Smith Sr., suffered a preventable stroke that left him speech-impaired and partially paralyzed, according to The New York Times. The experience, Nunez-Smith told Yale News, made her aware "there was a term for what we were: an underserved community, marginalized by place and by race."

The incident also informed her career trajectory. Not only is she an associate professor, she is also associate dean of health equity research, director of the Center for Community Engagement and Health Equity and founding director of the Equity Research and Innovation Center at Yale. As such, she has conducted studies on topics like Black mistrust of the medical establishment.

Of her responsibilities in the Biden administration, Nunez-Smith said, "I'm grateful for this chance to continue this work, to earn trust and to find success through genuine partnerships with the people and communities who've been hit the hardest during and before the crisis."

Born and raised on St. Thomas, one of the U.S. Virgin Islands, Nunez-Smith professed a fascination with human biology from an early age; that interest was encouraged by her mother, a nursing professor, and her godfather, a surgeon. She went on to major in psychology and biological anthropology at Swarthmore College and earned a medical degree from Jefferson Medical College, since renamed Sidney Kimmel Medical College.

But her impressive credentials haven't prevented patients and colleagues from making assumptions about her based on her race. Nunez-Smith told the Times that she is on occasion mistaken for a member of the janitorial staff by hospital patients.

Nunez-Smith plans to tackle both the causes of existing health inequities and their symptoms. "It is our societal obligation," she told Yale, "to ensure equitable access to testing, treatments, and vaccines, equitable support for those who are hurting, and equitable pathways to opportunity as we emerge from this crisis and rebuild, including for those most marginalized communities—the undocumented, the incarcerated, the homeless."

For further coverage of racial inequities related to the pandemic, read "Black Doctors Work to Make Coronavirus Testing More Equitable" and "Black Americans Are Getting Vaccinated at Lower Rates Than White Americans." And to learn more about how the Biden administration is responding to the pandemic, read "Biden Inauguration Will Include COVID-19 Memorial on Tuesday."

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