Researchers and Universities Push to Cure Health Care of Racial Bias

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Even though the overall health of Americans has improved over the last few decades, the disparities in treatment and health outcomes between white patients and people of color are almost as wide as they were 50 years ago—and experts say unconscious bias on the behalf of U.S. doctors could be to blame, NPR reports.

Lately, discrimination and prejudice in health care have been hot topics in the medical research field. One recent study found that African-American patients are prescribed far less pain medication than white patients with the same symptoms. As a result of findings like this one, the Institute of Medicine at the National Academy of Sciences recently called for far more studies to look into the issue of unconscious provider bias in U.S. hospitals.

Meanwhile, several medical schools, such as the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), the University of Texas Medical School at Houston, and the University of Massachusetts, began introducing formal lessons for their students on how to recognize their own unconscious racism and move beyond it to provide non-discriminatory care.

For example, at UCSF, all first-year med students are required to take a course where they take a series of timed computer tests designed to measure attitudes about race, gender, age, weight and other categories. Results of these tests have shown that 75 percent of people who take them have an unconscious preference for white patients—regardless of their own racial or ethnic background.

Experts said the course's aim isn't to call out people about their unconscious racism. "This is normal human behavior," said Howard Ross, a diversity consultant who developed the training program that UCSF bases its current curriculum on. "We can no more stop having bias than we can stop breathing."

Instead, the ultimate goal of researchers is to help young doctors acknowledge the sources of their biases and how to keep them in check.

For some examples of the role racial disparities play in health care outcomes, click here, here or here.

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http://beta.docker.realhealthmag.com/article/provider-racial-bias-27687-6333