

Reckoning With Racism in Nursing

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We're addressing

racism in nursing

My clinical specialty is in O.b.

I currently work as a professional development consultant

I knew I wanted to be in health care?

But I didn't know exactly what.

I don't have anybody in my family who's been to nursing school.

Well, I was the first college graduate in my family.

I chose public health as my major

because I knew that I was interested in

health disparities and that kind of thing.

I did an internship

with the County Health Department,

and it was on preconception health

in AfricanAmerican community in Portland.

Discovered that sitting in a cubicle and going to meetings

was not what I wanted to do with my career.

I knew about physician assistants.

I knew that I didn't want to be a doctor.

I don't think I was really

introduced to nursing as a profession,

even though I was in a health occupations program.

To finish my degree and then started applying.

And I was lucky enough to get into both of the schools

I applied to and went back to school.

I met a nurse who actually was a black nurse,

which is surprising

because we were in Corvallis, Oregon, which is .% white

Hearing her talk about

that profession and the work that she did

and how fulfilling it was, I think is what really motivated

and inspired me

that we are the ones that spend

the most time with the patient.

We get to know them, we get to notice those subtle changes.

We are their voice.

I feel like it really was luck

because I didn't know anybody who was a nurse.

I had never been sick.

Nobody in my family had really been sick.

I'm half white,

half black,

and my mom was white,

and she really was the person who raised me.

And I remember from a young age her telling me,

you have to work twice as hard.

It's not fair, but you're going to have to work twice as hard.

That kind of has always been in the back of my head

is that you have to be better, do better, you know, do more.

My brothers and I

were not just accepted at face value as being

the wonderful people that we are.

She told us, you have to be the best to be

thought of as an equal.

It's a heavy burden to carry,

but I also see

it being very true in the work that I do as a person of color.

Particularly as a black person in nursing,

that I do have to be phenomenal to be

noticed or believed or

for my voice to be heard.

Mostly, there was one person in my high school

who really helped me

and introduced me to college who was the counselor.

He also was a black man.

He took us on the historically Black

Colleges and Universities tour. He's the one who wrote me

a recommendation letter,

didn't have any black teacher, so just my counselor

and some of our administrative

staff were black, like the principal

and vice principal

to somebody else who looked like me to say,

Hey, you can go to college.

Here are some opportunities for you.

Every single job

I've had, I've been the only black person

in my department, on my unit, in my role.

I always worked in Portland.

It is predominately white

and there aren't a lot of black people.

And I always felt like I want those patients

you know, like they need me. I want that.

I want to care for those patients

walking into the room and automatically feeling

some bit of a connection

because we do have shared experiences.

I'm a very likable person and I get along with everyone.

You know, I haven't had any real issues in that regard.

Sometimes I wonder if that also doesn't

come into play of like feeling like I have to be likable,

you know, to be to be thought

of as worthy in that in the nursing team.

For me, the biggest issue

that I've experience with race in nursing

is just that I'm the only one

When I first became a nurse

educator within our hospital system,

we were going to all of the nursing leader,

hospital leader meetings.

Nobody told me this.

But I really felt like

I needed to put my best foot forward

and be the most palatable as I could be.

I wore my hair straight

for probably about the first year that I was in that role.

Not because anyone ever told me that my curly hair wasn't OK,

but people did tell me when my hair was straight.

Oh, your hair looks so pretty.

But as a black woman, our hair has a huge

part of our identity and how we're accepted in the world.

Sitting at this table

with all of the hospital leaders

and the nursing leaders, again,

I was the only black person in the room.

Maybe if I could look a

little bit more,

more like those people

or, you know, be less visible, maybe it was even more more of

the things that I was feeling. In nursing it's hard

for people to accept people with natural hair.

One of our admin assistants, she was the admin to our chief

nurse executive at the time.

She was a black woman with natural hair

who told her

she needed to do something different with her hair

because it reflected on her

to hear that, I was like, Oh my goodness,

I can believe it,

but I hate that it's true that that happened to know that,

she said

that to her and makes me think,

Oh gosh, what might she have thought about my hair?

Or How might that have influenced her opinion of my work?

Being given the easier work, if that makes sense.

I went and volunteered at a COVID clinic.

They actually didn't have enough nurses to administer vaccine.

They put me as a greeter instead of doing

the work that a nurse can do.

I mean, the vaccine is not just putting a needle

in somebody's arm, really meeting the person.

Some people are really terrified of this new medicine.

It's not just can you actually administer a vaccine?

There's like being a nurse,

which is what I love about being a nurse.

And I feel like that's not always acknowledged,

even in my current position.

I do a lot of computer entry and stuff

that does not require a master's prepared nurse.

I feel like I'm not working to the top of my scope

in the work that I'm currently doing.

My perfect world in

in health care would be really diverse

work force not just nursing, but all all health care.

Having a more diverse nursing work force

benefits everybody.

A colleague and I gave a talk on the health disparities.

So there are things that just really jumped out to me

as we were talking specifically

about how you can treat black families better.

If you do any of these things,

you're going to treat anybody that better have

inclusive language.

It's better for everybody

if you center

the patient as a person who knows their body best,

that's going to help everybody

We recently started the Black Nurses Association chapter

of Oregon

It has just been so amazing to have, again, community

community of other nurses to talk to.

And I think probably if I had had them sooner,

I might have realized maybe some of the experiences that I had

were experiences that other people had.

After we started, um, was,

uh, I think it was actually like our first Zoom

meeting with Freddie Gray had been murdered

just right before it.

For me, it was affecting my work.

I felt like I couldn't concentrate because it was just laying

so heavy on me.

We're not even talking about nursing,

but we just have to be together to share in our grief.

We as black people know that this is not new.

This is stuff that has been happening.

What's new

is the technology and the way to share it to everybody else.

What's new is that other people care

a little bit more now, that made me feel really vulnerable.

They don't know exactly what it's like,

but they have a little understanding

of what it's like to be black in America

so that you are automatically seen as guilty.

It was so nice to have this community that comes together

soon after we started.

They asked me if I wanted to do

to have a leadership role in the chapter,

so I now I'm the membership chair

Part of it was my drive,

just as an individual

my close friends, definitely from the Black Nurse Association.

Now that we have it,

this is where

I want to put my time and energy

because it also fills me back up.

Maybe it's a double edged sword

when people assume that I represent
all black people knowing that I'm a representative of my
ethnic group, wanting to really do my community proud,
I think makes me stronger in wanting to open door
for more people in this profession.