DAY 8: Racism is a Public Health Crisis

“Your ZIP code shouldn’t predict how long you live, but it does.”-- Dr. Robert Ross, President and CEO of the California Endowment

On July 1, 2020, the Washtenaw County Department of Health declared racism a public health crisis in our community. A declaration by the County’s Board of Commissioners followed. What does this mean? It confirms that racism— not genetics, not culture, not health behaviors— is the root cause of disparities that “harms, kills and prevents individuals and communities from living healthy lives,” and commits the Health Department to sharing power, decision-making and resources with community members and communities of color who are most impacted by existing health disparities.

According to the NY Times 1619 Project, “racial health disparities are as foundational as democracy itself.” The negative and compounding impacts of socioeconomic status and institutional racism lead to shorter life spans and higher likelihood of adverse health outcomes for people living in poverty and people of color. Importantly, a study published in the journal Nature illustrates that this is not a result of individual choices, but rather institutional racism. It found that millions of Black people have been affected by racial bias in health-care algorithms used by many U.S. hospitals, resulting in Black people being less likely than white people who were equally sick being referred to programs.

Because healthcare costs typically make up a significant portion of a household’s annual budget, this places additional stress on families with low to moderate incomes (ALICE). And, just because you have healthcare does not guarantee that it is affordable or accessible.

Share your reflections on today’s topic on social media using the hashtag #unitedforequity or #uwwcequitychallenge and tag @uwwashtenaw.
Today’s Challenge:

Listen:
- Listen to this podcast about how unconscious bias becomes dangerous in emergency medical situations where providers are much more likely to default to making decisions based on stereotypes.
- Listen to this episode of Washtenaw United on WEMU, where Dr. Roxane Raffin Chan shares practices for using holistic healing to cope with racism-related stress.
- Hear the story of Henrietta Lacks, an African American woman whose cells have been used to test the effects of radiation and poisons and played a crucial role in the development of the polio vaccine. Trigger warning: Viewers may experience strong emotions learning that while Ms. Lacks’ cells have been the source of life-saving medical solutions, no consent was obtained to culture her cells, nor were she or her family compensated for their extraction or use.

Read:
- Check out this Fact Sheet from the American Psychological Association exploring the compounding impact of socioeconomic status and race on health.
- Read this article to better understand COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy among Black Americans, which points out that the Tuskegee experiment still looms large within the Black community.

Watch:
- Watch the Racial Roots of Vaccine Skepticism – With Special Guests: Lt. Gov. Garlin Gilchrist II, Dr. Joneigh Khaldun- Chief Medical Executive and Chief Deputy Director for Health and Human Services.
- Watch Dr. Nwando Olayiwola explain how the medical profession does harm to patients by perpetuating racism & committing place-ism, ignoring place & health connections.

Act:
- Today is MLK Day. It is the only federal holiday designated as a national day of service to encourage all Americans to volunteer to improve their communities. Plan your “day on” by exploring ways to serve and learn through our virtual Volunteer Center.
- Journal, reflect and share:
  - Has a doctor ever dismissed your symptoms or made you feel as though it was “in your head”? How did it make you feel?
  - How have social determinants of health impacted your own quality of life or care?

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