Structural Racism and the Other Pandemic

Camara Phyllis Jones, MD, MPH, PhD

Invited Speaker
NHMA / NMA Joint Webinar
“COVID-19 Impacts on Black and Latino Communities: Where are we now?“
National Hispanic Medical Association
National Medical Association

Via Zoom from Atlanta, Georgia
April 28, 2021
Dual Reality: A restaurant saga
I looked up and noticed a sign . . .
Racism structures “Open/Closed” signs in our society.
Those on the outside are very aware of the two-sided nature of the sign.

It is difficult to recognize a system of inequity that privileges us.

Jones CP. The Nation’s Health, February 2016.
Is there really a two-sided sign?

Hard to know, when only see “Open”. A privilege not to HAVE to know. Once DO know, can choose to act.
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- Unfairly disadvantages some individuals and communities
- Unfairly advantages other individuals and communities
- Saps the strength of the whole society through the waste of human resources

“How is racism operating here?”

- Identify mechanisms
  - **Structures**: the who?, what?, when?, and where? of decision-making
  - **Policies**: the written how?
  - **Practices and norms**: the unwritten how?
  - **Values**: the why?

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Excess deaths of people of color from COVID-19

- **More likely to become infected**
  - More exposed
  - Less protected

- **Once infected, more likely to die**
  - More burdened by chronic diseases
  - With less access to health care
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Narrow focus on the individual and the COVID-19 pandemic

- Testing
- Masking
- School re-opening discussions
- Vaccine clinical trial endpoints
- Vaccine optimism
- Vaccine roll-out phases
- COVID-19 death toll
Narrow focus on the individual and the COVID-19 pandemic

- **Testing**
  - **Background:** In 2020, the US treated COVID-19 as a medical care issue rather than a public health issue.
  - **Medical care approach:** Confirm individual diagnoses for those who are symptomatic or exposed.
  - **Public health approach:** Estimate the amount of virus circulating in the population by testing both symptomatic and asymptomatic persons.
  - **Why does it matter?** Time delay and undercount in estimates of the amount of virus circulating through the population:
    - Positive tests of symptomatic persons: 7 to 10 days delay
    - Hospitalizations: 2 to 3 weeks delay
    - Deaths: 3 to 5 weeks delay
    - Probability surveys: real time
Narrow focus on the individual and the COVID-19 pandemic

Masking

- Individual orientation: Wear masks primarily to protect oneself
- Collective orientation: Wear masks primarily to protect others

Why does it matter? Mask mandates are essential to protect the health of the public in the face of individual objections:
  - “There is no virus”
  - “I don’t feel vulnerable”
  - “Masks are uncomfortable”
  - “Masks make you sick”
Narrow focus on the individual and the COVID-19 pandemic

- **School re-opening discussions**
  - Individual focus: Low levels of childhood illness
  - Community focus: Possibility that children can spread disease
  - **Why does it matter?** Need safeguards against spread from schools into communities
Narrow focus on the individual and the COVID-19 pandemic

- **Vaccine clinical trial endpoints**
  - Individual focus: Symptomatic disease as primary endpoint
  - Population focus: Asymptomatic viral infection as additional endpoint of interest
  - **Why does it matter?** Asymptomatic spread is fueling the pandemic
Narrow focus on the individual and the COVID-19 pandemic

- **Vaccine optimism**
  - **Background:** The virus will infect any available, vulnerable host
  - **Focus on vaccines:** Decrease the vulnerability of individual hosts
  - **Focus on public health strategies:** Decrease the number of available hosts
  - **Why does it matter?** We need to fully implement public health strategies (both individual and governmental) even as we roll out the highly anticipated vaccines
Narrow focus on the individual and the COVID-19 pandemic

- **Vaccine roll-out phases**
  - **Background:** Need to acknowledge two types of risk
  - **Individual risk:** Increased VULNERABILITY due to age or medical conditions
  - **Structural risk:** Increased EXPOSURE at work or where live
  - **Why does it matter?** Vaccine allocation addressing structural risk is needed to address the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on communities of color
Narrow focus on the individual and the COVID-19 pandemic

- **COVID-19 death toll**
  - Individual focus: Those dying from COVID-19 represent private losses to loved ones
  - Collective focus: Those dying from COVID-19 represent shared losses to the whole society
  - **Why does it matter?** We all need to recognize and mourn our monumental collective loss as a nation
    
    Even those who have not yet experienced the loss of a family member, friend, or colleague to COVID-19

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