

Dear Penn Medicine Colleagues,

It is with a heavy heart that we send our deepest condolences to the family and friends of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and countless others who have died senselessly at the hands of those sworn to protect our communities, simply because of the color of their skin— an attribute that none of these slain individuals had any say in choosing. This skin color for so many is perceived as threatening, and time and time again Black individuals are subject to despicable treatment resulting in death.

This treatment, these outcomes, however are not new. This treatment is simply now being recorded and going viral. This treatment means that every day, normal happenings such as jogging, sitting in your own home, playing in the park, wearing a hoodie, going to the store, getting a traffic ticket, and bird watching to name a few, are seen as defiant acts that might lead to murder. George Floyd's death was a modern-day lynching that we all watched on national television. We too are hurting, angry, tired, and frustrated about the killings of these individuals who had a lot more life to live. We are heartbroken that their names have now been added to an already exhaustive list.

“Two deadly viruses are killing Americans: COVID-19 and racism.” This was stated by CNN anchor, Don Lemon following the most recent incidents of racism that have now gripped the nation and the world. Black communities continue to be disproportionately affected by COVID-19, many reasons of which are due to systemic racism, bias, and discrimination in society and in healthcare systems. The pandemic simply peeled back the curtain and unveiled more clearly the many ways inequality exists in this nation. But again, this is not new. It was recently released that George Floyd was positive for COVID-19. It is deplorable that he survived one threat only to succumb to the other public health crisis: racism. And as the media news outlets rightfully cover his horrific death and protests around the country, many are still dealing with the ongoing wounds of COVID-19. These two are inextricably linked.

Let us state clearly: Black Lives Matter. To the Black faculty, staff, and students specifically, we hear you, we see you, we want you to know you matter and we support you; not only during this heightened moment but after the headlines and media coverage are gone. We know that this time has been extremely difficult. Black Lives Matter is not simply a hashtag, it is recognizing Black individuals as their full selves, full identities, countless contributions to society, truly valuing their bodies, treating them equally to their White and non-White counterparts, and the call to end police brutality against Black bodies. In addition, we must recognize the angst and pain that so many of our Black faculty, students, and staff have been experiencing. It is not easy to maintain professionalism and conduct “business as usual” during a pandemic that has hit their community harder while carrying the weight of persistent violence and death against their communities during the same time. Yet our colleagues continue to do so while attending Zoom meeting after Zoom meeting, sending countless emails, and studying for medical licensing exams. We as a community should not only be mindful and aware of what has occurred but acknowledge how it affects your Black colleagues mentally, physically, and emotionally. Not only should it come from executive leadership, as it has earlier this week, but also from direct supervisors, division chiefs, chairs and the like.

This is the year 2020. One of us is an ophthalmologist, Dr. Higginbotham. Her specialty understands 2020 as “20/20”, the clearest vision we can have as individuals. So, while there is a lot to be uncertain about during this time we are in, we have hope that this year has given our country the clarity and transparency it so desperately needed. It can be argued that this country is finally seeing herself with 20/20 vision. 2020 so far has made us as a society uncomfortable, but in discomfort there is immense opportunity for learning, growth, and catalyst for change. Let us continue to clearly see what the Black community has seen and endured for generations and generations. Let us clearly see that we are at a pivotal moment in history and be hopeful that if we continue to protest, vote, and organize, change can and will come. For the medical community more specifically, this needs to be done as well. There is a long and troubling history of racism in our profession. From silence about racism to creating and perpetuating harmful racist ideologies to practicing race-based medicine that still persists and is taught in undergraduate medical education today. It is long overdue that we look into our internal power structures and ask ourselves the hard questions and provide the necessary answers without a filter to make others comfortable. If this pandemic has taught us anything, it is that dismantling systemic racism and white supremacy are necessary to move forward. It has reaffirmed that social justice *is* our lane. It has taught us that the medical community only focusing on biological factors is irresponsible and detrimental to the patients that we serve – especially in the city of Philadelphia, the poorest of the nation’s largest cities.

This statement serves as an acknowledgement of the pain, but we know that it is not enough. We know that tangible actions need to follow. This is a time to really self-reflect, both individually and as an institution. Truly acknowledge our past history and where we are currently so that the future will be more just. We are aware that none of us created the structures but we are the ones that have been tasked with dismantling them. As physicians, scientists, staff, students, and educators, we are in a position to lead but we need the entire community to come together to do so. The onus is not on Black people and other people of color to do this difficult but necessary work. It is not enough to not be racist, we need all individuals to be anti-racist to continue to carry out the values and mission of our beloved institution and finally have the words in the constitution apply to all individuals– not as it was intended but as it morally should be.

Dominique Alexis
Kya Hertz
Corrinne Fahl, MEd
Eve Higginbotham, SM, MD, ML
The Office of Inclusion of Diversity