“All History Shows that Ignorance, Poverty and Oppression are Enemies of Health and Longevity”: A History of Discrimination and Health

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Objectives

- Examine the role of historical analysis in understanding the links between discrimination and health

- Analyze racial disparities in health and health care in the twentieth century, focusing on tuberculosis in the African-American community

- Discuss some of the lessons learned from this history for contemporary researchers
History and Contemporary Health Policy

“To know about the past is to know that things have not always been as they are now, and by implication that they need not remain the same in the future.”

John Tosh
The Pursuit of History
History as a Research Methodology in Contemporary Medicine, Public Health, and Health Policy

- Sets the Questions
- Identifies Patterns, Trends, and Key Actors
- Examines Assumptions
- Tests Analogies
History as a Research Methodology in Contemporary Medicine, Public Health, and Health Policy

- Provides background and context
- Identifies past strategies, policies, decisions, and outcomes
- Delineates various influences, including intellectual, social, political, scientific
- Analyzes divergence and continuity with the past
Historical Analysis and Contemporary Issues in Racial/Ethnic Discrimination and Disparities in Health and Health Care

- Demonstrates factors that have influenced the concept of race
- Shows how racial attitudes have influenced medical and public health theory
- Illustrates how medical and public health theories have influenced social policies
- Details the various interpretations of racial differences and their consequences
- Makes plain the long history and stubborn tenacity of racial disparities in health and health care
Historical Analysis and Contemporary Issues in Racial/Ethnic Discrimination and Disparities in Health and Health Care

- Illuminates the attitudes of racial and ethnic groups toward medicine and health care and the attitudes of health professionals towards these groups
- Demonstrates the agency of racial and ethnic minorities
- Provides a mechanism to examine the experiences of members of racial and ethnic groups as providers and patients
What were the causes of disparities in tuberculosis rates between black and white Americans in the early twentieth century?
Tuberculosis and African Americans

“The greatest enemy of the black race is consumption.”

-- W.E.B. DuBois, 1906

In 1920, the tuberculosis rate per 100,000 was 86 for whites and 202 for blacks.
Frederick L. Hoffman (1865–1946)
What Factors Contributed to the High Incidence of Tuberculosis in African Americans between 1900-1940?

- Emancipation
- “Race traits and tendencies”
  - Anatomical and physiological differences
  - Innate mental characteristics
  - Immorality
“The colored race is shown to be on the downward grade, tending toward a condition in which matters will be worse than they are now...and gradual extinction of the race [sic] place.”
Dr. W. E. B. DuBois (1868 - 1963)
Du Bois’s Response to Hoffman

“The undeniable fact is, then, that in certain diseases the Negroes have a much higher rate than whites, and especially in consumption, pneumonia, and other fatal diseases. The question is: Is this racial? Mr. Hoffman would lead us to say yes, and to infer that it means that Negroes are inherently inferior in physique to whites. But the difference in Philadelphia can be explained on other grounds than upon race.”
The Atlanta University Publications, No. 11

The Health and Physique of the Negro American

A Social Study made under the direction of Atlanta University by the Eleventh Atlanta Conference

Price, 75 Cents

The Atlanta University Press
Atlanta, Georgia
1906
Charles Victor Roman (1864 – 1934)
The Atlanta University Publications, No. 11

The Health and Physique of the Negro American

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The Atlanta University Press
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1906
Passed a resolution stating that they “did not find any adequate scientific warrant for the assumption that the Negro race is inferior to other races in physical build or vitality. The present differences in mortality seem to be sufficiently explained by conditions of life.”
Dr. Virginia Alexander (1899 – 1949)
Dr. Virginia Alexander (1899 – 1949)

The Social, Economic, and Health Problems of North Philadelphia’s Negroes and Their Relation to a Proposed Interracial Public Health Center (1935)
African-American Social Scientists, Physicians, and Social Activists Address TB Disparities at the Turn of the Twentieth Century
Socioeconomic Factors
“All History Shows that Ignorance, Poverty and Oppression are Enemies of Health and Longevity”

C.V. Roman
"With improved sanitary conditions, improved education, and better economic opportunities, the mortality of the race may and probably will steadily decrease until it becomes normal."

W.E. B. DuBois
Baltimore 1915

Samuel Roberts, Infectious Fear
Baltimore 1910

Samuel Roberts, *Infectious Fear*
Race and Diagnosis

“On the point of deaths from consumption, I would say this: hosts of the poor are attended by young, inexperienced white physicians. They have inherited the traditions of their elders, and let a black patient cough, they immediately have visions of tubercles. Let him die, and though in the case there may be good reason for a difference of opinion, he writes ‘tuberculosis’ and heaves a great sigh of relief that one more source of contagion is removed.”

Dr. Rebecca J. Cole 1896
Racial Discrimination in Health Care

“While reading The Washington Times I notice the description of your Sanitarium and the Wonderful Work you are doing for the Consumptive. I write to ask you would you take me at your Sanitarium.”

P.S. “I am a Colored boy. Do you take Colored People?”

Robert D. Freeman to Dr. Lawrence Flick, 18 November 1906
The Pickford Sanitarium.

For

Consumptive Negroes

Southern Pines, N.C.
Ward at Henryton State (Maryland)
Sanatorium for Colored Consumptives, CA.
1924

Samuel Roberts, *Infectious Fear*
Stigmatization of Black Domestic Workers

Tera Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*
Tera Hunter, *To ‘Joy My Freedom*
Lugenia Burns Hope (1871–1947)
Neighborhood Union, Atlanta, 1915
Neighborhood Union, Atlanta, 1915
Lillian J. B. Thomas Fox (1866-1917)
Founder, Woman’s Improvement Club
Tuberculosis and Mexicans

“The industrialist and agriculturist in the West and the Southwest, in importing Mexican laborers, are also importing a race “sizzling with susceptibilities.”...The public health official is ‘tilting at windmills’ in his attempt to reduce tuberculosis mortality if tuberculous susceptibles are allowed to flock into his community in droves. The Mexican will not, like the Indian, suffer or die alone, but will increase dissemination of infection in the community in which he was infected.”--

Benjamin Goldberg, MD
“Tuberculosis in Racial Types with Special Reference to Mexicans”
AJPH, 1929
Lessons Learned

- The significance of conceptual frameworks in framing solutions
- The links between health discrimination and discrimination in other arenas
- The importance of broad-based collaborations
- The emphasis on research-based activism
“We must study, we must investigate, we must attempt to solve.”

*The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (1899)