

STUDENT ROUNDS

Visions of Equity

STUDENT CONFERENCE AIMS TO EMPOWER HEALTH ACTIVISTS AGAINST HEALTH CARE INEQUITIES.

“There is power in the white coat you wear.” That was the message imparted by gun violence prevention advocate Kina Collins, speaking at the Health Justice Conference 2020 at Upstate Medical University. Collins, leader of Generation Progress, a Chicago-based advocacy group (and currently a Congressional candidate), urged those studying medicine to advocate for change. She cited a debate between the National Rifle Association (NRA) and doctors calling for restrictions on firearms. Following an NRA Twitter post admonishing physicians to “stay in your lane,” a group of doctors responded with their own online campaign, #ThisIsOurLane, which included bloody photos of themselves and their operating rooms after trying to save the lives of gun violence victims.

Collins’ talk, in which she compared gun violence to a “virus,” was among a variety of breakout sessions on topics ranging from abortion access and infant mortality to addressing health disparities through universal healthcare, organized by College of Medicine students under the theme “Visions of Equity.”

In the United States, health outcomes are influenced by factors including race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and geographic location. “It’s important to let people know there is still a lot of work to do to improve health equity,” says conference co-chair Azwade Rahman, a third-year MD/MPH student.

One of the most powerful presentations came from Mario Mendoza, MD, a clinical anesthesiologist and health-care consultant, who shared his own



Kina Collins (right), a community activist from Chicago, spoke about gun violence as a public health issue at the conference. She led an ice breaker with students during her session (above).

immigration story coming from El Salvador at age seven, and his 12-hour journey with a “coyote” across the U.S.-Mexico border. He told about growing up in the Bronx as an undocumented immigrant, his family’s unsuccessful application for political asylum, becoming a naturalized citizen in the 2000s, and how mentors helped guide his path into science, medical school, and beyond. Mendoza is the founder of the nonprofit organization, LifeUNdocumented, which works to support humane immigration policy that is data driven and globally responsive.

“It was very impactful because he was telling his own story and he’s very passionate about what he’s doing,” says conference co-chair Robertha Barnes, a first-year medical student. “Everyone kept talking about his session. One of my friends said she cried.”

Health Justice at Upstate was founded by medical students Sydney Russell Leed ’21 and Tanesha Beckford ’20 in 2017 with assistance from Upstate’s Center for Bioethics and Humanities. The first conference, Health Justice: Breaking Down Barriers, was held in 2018. Since then, the initiative has blossomed to include a student scholarship fund and donations to local grassroots organizations. Held on Martin Luther King Day, this year’s conference was organized by Rahman and Barnes along with first-year medical student Deashia McAlpine, all of whom volunteered at the conference last year (Barnes and McAlpine as master’s students in medical technology as part of the MS Scholars program).

The goal of the conference is to educate participants about structural inequalities in health care and empower health activists to take meaningful action against the social and structural barriers to health faced by patients.

All three co-chairs cited similar motivations for their own involvement. “I wanted to educate my peers on issues they may not know a lot about—such as the connection between gun violence and public health or abortion access,” says Barnes. “The goal is to inspire people to make change and teach them ways to make change in their communities.”



The 2020 Health Justice at Upstate Conference was organized by co-chairs Deashia McAlpine ’23, Azwade Rahman ’22, and Robertha Barnes ’23.

After settling on their conference theme, the three brainstormed relevant issues then researched expert speakers. Some of those came from Upstate, others from across the country. “We don’t want to repeat the same presentations every year because there’s plenty to talk about,” says Rahman.

The daylong event began and ended with break-out sessions to give attendees the opportunity to hone in on their own interests, as well as to network and discuss solutions. A soul food lunch was followed by the keynote address, given by Utibe R. Essien, assistant professor of Medicine at the University of Pittsburgh. Dr. Essien’s research is focused on racial and ethnic health disparities. He is core investigator in the Center for Health Equity Research and Promotion in the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System, where he studies patient, provider, and system-level predictors of use of novel treatments in chronic disease management among veterans.

In his talk, “Bending the Arc Toward Justice in Health,” Essien shared correlations between health outcomes, race, and income levels. He demonstrated via maps that an individual’s health outcome was statistically different based on their subway stop, showing evidence both

in New York City and Boston.

Like other speakers, Essien called on students to actively speak out for justice in health care, and offered pointers for equitable practice, including “check your biases” and “always consider social determinants.”

Despite a snow-storm the day before, nearly 300 students attended the conference, hailing from as far as SUNY Buffalo and Canisius

College to the west and Brooklyn from the east. McAlpine says she was particularly pleased by the large number of undergraduate students in attendance, something she would like to see expand further in years to come.

She would also like to see leadership of the conference expand beyond the College of Medicine and MPH program to bring in additional perspectives. “When we were planning the group discussions we wanted, I didn’t realize some of those topics would be so heavily important because they weren’t in my wheelhouse,” McAlpine says. “Getting a perspective from somebody else who’s really interested in health justice but comes from another area of healthcare can only add to the mix.”

The three co-chairs agreed that while planning a successful conference was more consuming than they’d bargained for, their sacrifice of time and effort was well worth it.

“The real reason I’m pursuing medicine is to stand up for people who are commonly left out and not given a voice,” says Barnes. “So even though I’m only just starting out, I feel like in my own little way I got a chance to advocate and take some action right now.” ■