

The lasting impact of racism in medicine

Featuring **Barbara Berney, PhD, MPH**
Producer, [Power to Heal: Medicare and the Civil Rights Revolution](#)



This time on Code WACK!

How did desegregation impact Black patients in America? And what hasn't changed? What does racism in medicine look like today? *And what should we do when we see it?*

To break it down, we spoke to **Dr. Barbara Berney**, project creator and producer of the documentary "[Power to Heal: Medicare and the Civil Rights Revolution](#)." She's also an emeritus professor at City University of New York School of Public Health and a distinguished scholar in public health, environmental justice, and the U.S. healthcare system. *This is the second of two episodes with Dr. Berney.*

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How did desegregation in the 1960s, which happened over essentially a few months, change things for Blacks in America?

“So desegregation under Medicare was a really important change for Black patients in America.

“And one of the studies that was done was the number of Black babies in the South were born in hospitals rather than at home. And the number of Black babies born in hospitals and the percentage of Black babies born in hospitals went up dramatically after hospitals were desegregated.

“It meant an enormous amount for people who were in accidents, they could go to the closest hospital as opposed to going to the closest Black hospital. It meant that when people were sick, they could go to the hospital, which they hadn't been able to go before.” – **Barbara Berney, PhD, MPH**

What was inferior about the Black ward? Why didn't people want to go there?

“So first of all, black wards had every kind of patient. If you were black and you were hospitalized, you would go to the black ward, whether you had TB or were going to have a baby. And obviously if you were gonna have a baby, you didn't wanna be next to people who had TB because your baby, and you could end up with tb.

“... [Dr. Alvin Poussaint](#) talks about black wards in hospitals, and he said everything was inferior, that the number of nurses assigned per patient was much less, the physical conditions were not as good. The blankets, the equipment, everything was not as good in the Black wards as it was in the white wards.” – **Barbara Berney, PhD, MPH**

Desegregation was an important milestone to combating racism and medicine. Yet studies of maternal mortality and more show that today significant disparities still exist. How would you describe where we are some 60 years later?

“...it's really important to remember that, of course, once they get to a medical facility, that blacks and whites are not treated the same ... that there's still discrimination, that when they do studies of medical students now, and doctors have the same attitudes that medical students do, but they find that medical students think that of blacks feel pain differently, that they have thicker skin or all kinds of of thing things that they believe that are simply not true.

“But I think that we also have to remember that racism is a fundamental problem, not just in health care, but in all aspects of American society. That segregation and racism affect housing, affect neighborhoods and the environment in those neighborhoods, how close they are to highways or other kinds of toxic facilities that racism and segregation affect education and they affect jobs. And that all those things affect your condition when you enter the hospital, certainly, and they affect what it's like for you when you're pregnant.” – ***Barbara Berney, PhD, MPH***

Helpful Links

[Power to Heal: Medicare and the Civil Rights Revolution \(2018\), Trailer](#)

[What Serena Williams's scary childbirth story says about medical treatment of black women, Vox](#)

[Ending Unequal Treatment In The United States Health Care System, Health Affairs](#)

[The lasting impact of hospital segregation, Lown Institute](#)

[How we fail black patients in pain](#), *Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC)*

Episode Transcript

Read the [episode transcript](#)

Guest Biography - Barbara Berney, PhD, MPH

Dr. Barbara Berney, Project Creator, Producer of *Power to Heal: Medicare and the Civil Rights Revolution*, is Emeritus Associate Professor at City University of New York School of Public Health and a distinguished scholar in public health, environmental justice, and the U.S. healthcare system.

She taught health policy analysis, the US healthcare system, and documentary production for public health practitioners in the CUNY School of Public Health. She holds an MPH in Health Administration from UCLA and a PhD in Health Policy from Boston University where she was a Pew Scholar.

Her diverse experience includes working as a frontline health worker in south Los Angeles, a policy analyst with the United Mine Workers Health and Retirement Funds and with the Bureau of Health Professions in the Department of Health and Human Services. She was recruited to be the Director of an OSHA-funded Occupational Health Education Center that provided occupational health education to women and minority workers. She served as staff to the White House Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments and for the Environmental League of Massachusetts where she was one of the people responsible for getting requirements for green schools into Massachusetts legislation.

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