

Segregation in health care: America's racist - *and deadly* - legacy

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



This time on Code WACK!

What did segregation look like in hospitals and medical facilities in America, and did it only extend to the South? *What finally brought an end to the deadly practice that cost countless Black and Brown lives?*

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 first of two episodes with Dr. Berney.*

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What did segregated medical care - a brutal reality for Black Americans - look like on the ground?

“There were a lot of hospitals, especially where Black people were simply not admitted. They were just sent away, or they wouldn't even go because they knew that you couldn't go – that was a white hospital and you weren't going to be admitted there. And there are examples of this in the movie. Toni Daniels was not admitted to the first two hospitals that she went to. She had polio. [Hospitals] were just not admitting Black people.

“... People were sent long distances and often died on the way to the hospital because there wasn't a Black hospital close to them, even if they were very sick or had been in really terrible accidents.

“... One example in the film is that patients who were in Yazoo City, which was a city in Mississippi, were sent to Jackson [Mississippi] because they couldn't be admitted to the hospital in Yazoo City because that was a White hospital and they were simply not admitting Blacks and they had to go to Jackson, and if they couldn't make it to Jackson, then they would die on the way.” – **Barbara Berney, PhD, MPH**

What about segregation in the North, in cities like Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago. There were racial quotas in many hospitals, right?

“Yes. ... For example, in Chicago, the University of Chicago had a quota. One of the people in the movie was a physician at the University of Chicago, and he pointed out that once they met their quota of 10%, that no matter what was wrong with you, if you were Black, you went to Cook County Hospital and there were lots of examples like that in northern hospitals.” – **Barbara Berney, PhD, MPH**

Let's talk about when Medicare was passed in the 1960's, did the American Medical Association support it?

"... at the time when Medicare was passed ... Black doctors and the National Medical Association - *the association that basically represented Black doctors and nurses* ... were the only doctors by and large who supported Medicare. And they wanted hospitals desegregated in return for their support for the Medicare legislation.

"And Lyndon Johnson had a Secretary of Health Education and Welfare, John Gardner, who was also in favor of desegregation, and it was really important both to the National Medical Association and to Gardner and the people that he hired - that hospitals be desegregated as a condition of them getting Medicare money and they managed to set it up so that you have to be certified first. And one of the conditions of certification was that you be desegregated.

So hospitals were able to say that they had to desegregate and they did have to desegregate in order to get Medicare money. And they had to get Medicare money because for many hospitals that was going to be like half of their income was to be Medicare money. If you weren't certified as desegregated and otherwise eligible for Medicare funds, the hospital had to go to court and if you were not desegregated, then you probably were never going to get funds. This was something that was pretty hard to lie about." - ***Barbara Berney, PhD, MPH***

Helpful Links

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

[How Social Security Helped Desegregate America's Hospitals, Social Security Matters](#)

[The Forgotten Role of Medicare in Desegregating US Healthcare, United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America.](#)

[The Black Hospital Movement \(1865 - 1960's\), Duke University Medical Center](#)

[Public Health, Racism, and the Lasting Impact of Hospital Segregation, Public Health Reports, SAGE Publications](#)

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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