

The Crossing Bridges Summit

October Summit Talk: Medical Perspectives on Black Women's Health

2020 - 2021 Crossing Bridges Theme

In 2019, researchers at the University of Pittsburgh contributed to "Pittsburgh's Inequality Across Gender and Race" report. The report highlighted stark findings about Black women's health in Pittsburgh, findings that motivated us to look at the medical, socioeconomic, environmental, psychological and political perspectives at play. There is a heightened awareness in our communities about racism and inequity that provides an important context and urgency to our work.

Overview of Summit Talks

Faculty, staff, students and community members attended the October Summit Talk to discuss six questions posed by the panelists from our Medical Perspectives on Black Women's Health session. By applying a local lens to these questions, we will actively engage with others to be a change agent in our communities.

Compelling Questions

Q: Jessica Brooks, chief executive officer and executive director of the Pittsburgh Business Group on Health, encouraged us to think about racism as a public health crisis. She expects leaders to play a role in finding solutions to health equity, and she also encouraged us to break down silos in our communities. How might we take up the issue of racism as a public health crisis?

The Crossing Bridges Summit and its conversations highlight the power of storytelling and narrative. The gender and race inequality report produced quantitative data. Qualitative research can provide the narrative that will bring instance of structural racism in healthcare to light. Encouraging patients to self-document their care, and empowering them to tell and circulate their stories is one way to demonstrate that instances of poor maternal healthcare are not a singular event, but an iteration of a larger structural problem.

Q: Liz Miller, co-director of "The Pittsburgh Study" and Professor in Pediatrics, Public Health, and Clinical and Translational Science at the University of Pittsburgh, spoke about systemic racism and her concerns that we tolerate the fact that more than half of the Black and Brown children in our communities live in poverty. Why do we tolerate this? What can be done?

"Tolerance is a lifestyle of indifference to other people's sufferings" – Johnathan White, Lecturer in History, Penn State Greater Allegheny

Trauma is normalized in Black communities. We cannot be silent about the experiences of Black women in our region, and we must be committed to improving the lives of women. Through humility and compassion, serving as mentors, and using resources to address failed institutions, we can be the advocates who ensure Black women thrive. We can begin with young people. We can reimagine how to build up their lives, nurture them, and teach them how to dream.

Q: Jamila Pleas, founder of health and wellness group Her Birth Right, mentioned that we need to be our sister's keeper. Both Pleas and Demia Horsley, director of strategic initiatives at Healthy Start, spoke of the dangers of the "fourth trimester." What do we need to do to be our sister's keeper?

Unconscious bias exists in society and the health care industry is not immune to this problem. Our challenge is to increase institutional accountability to address bias when it occurs. Through education and training, we can help individuals recognize bias and encourage them to express their concerns and fears. In a society filled with information, and misinformation, we must identify and bring to light reliable sources of information so that Black women can make informed decisions about their health care.

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Crossing Bridges Summit Pillars

The Crossing Bridges Summit is one of Penn State Greater Allegheny's Signature Programs. Initiated in 2017, the program brings campus and community members together to bridge racial divides in The Mon Valley and broader region. The summit consists of Five Pillars.

Speaker Series: The Speakers Series welcomes prominent local and national figures to offer different perspectives on questions of race and racism in the United States and the Mon Valley.

Summit Talks: Summit Talks occur after each Speaker Series event. Faculty, staff, students and community members join discussion leaders to consider each speaker's major points. Participants identify actionable items Greater Allegheny will pursue as it works to be an agent for positive change.

Unity Talks : Our student-led campus-based discussions focus on topics that emerge from student dialogue about race and racism. Unity Talks engage students, faculty, and staff in honest dialogue about issues that concern students.

Visiting Scholar Series: The Visiting Scholar Series brings intellectuals, artists, activists and others to campus for a yearlong engagement to include teaching, community outreach, research, and/or creative performance. Dr. Tom Poole, a civil rights scholar with extensive work in educational equity is the current Visiting Scholar.

Task Force on Racial Equity and Justice: Our Task Force on Racial Equity and Justice works to create a community in which individuals can thrive and be successful. The Task Force is responsible for examining curriculum and programming and making recommendations to ensure that all members of the campus community develop an understanding of racial justice, racism and its impact on society.



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Compelling Questions

Q: Pleas talked about the unconscious bias in the public health system. She asked us to teach sensitivity and to have culturally sensitive patient education. Where and how may this occur?

We are the pipeline. We educate students for medical and social service professions, and we can do this in ways that raise their awareness about culturally sensitive patient care. This includes understanding the historic roots of bias and discrimination in medical care toward Black and Brown people in the United States, as well as common misperceptions and problems that lead to disproportionately poor outcomes for Black women. Culturally sensitive care will also embrace advocacy for Black women that includes support for doulahs and other support services.

We are also in a position to influence the experiences of Black and Brown students in K-12 and increase their success in STEM fields. By addressing math phobia, working to remove hostility in learning environments, advocating for Black and Brown students, and supporting first generation college students, we can increase the number of BIPOC professionals in public health.

Q: Horsley talked about weathering. She shared how stressful it is to have these discussions. How do we effect change knowing about the impact these situations and discussions have on our Black and Brown colleagues and friends?

Weathering is the stress of racism that brings physical and biological impacts to Black women's health. This phenomena is intergenerational and one of the factors attributed to high Black maternal mortality rates. Although tensions can exist between those who would rather ignore racist comments or behaviors and those who recognize that not addressing racism continues the cycle of mistreatment, silence will not effect change. We need advocates who can amplify Black womens' voices until they are heard and understood. We can use our collective experiences to build knowledge and become a resource for those who follow us.

Q: All panelists spoke about the need for policy change. Where do we begin this work? How do we link arms with organizations like Black Mama's Matter Alliance and the National Birth Equity Alliance, along with local groups like Healthy Start?

Representation matters. When a person doesn't look like you, there exists an opportunity for distrust. Increasing persons of color in public health could help to improve the care for Black and Brown women and their children. Funding to pursue these fields and incentives to work within our communities after graduation are necessary. Within our communities, we can strive for a "domino effect." This could include sharing reliable resources and accurate information so many can benefit from available services. Partnering with high schools and community agencies, we can begin to emphasis holistic health for young Black and Brown women.

Action Items

AWARENESS, ACTION, CHANGE.

This is why The Crossing Bridges Summit exists. As we become aware of practices, policies, and conditions that cause inequity, we unite and take action. We join with community partners, working in our sphere of influence to bring meaningful change to make a difference in our region.

We cannot ignore the reoccurring themes we heard in October: storytelling and advocacy and access to reliable sources of information. In the coming months, we will invite women to document and share their experiences. Through their words, may we be inspired to advocate for improved health outcomes. In collaboration with local organizations, we will disseminate information in our communities so women can make informed health choices.

To learn more about the action items or to become involved in the work, please email marketing-psuga@psu.edu

Schedule of Upcoming Events

Speaker Series:

Date and Time to be Announced

Socioeconomic & Environmental Perspectives on Black Women's Health

Panelists will focus on community and societal factors that influence Black Women's Health

Summit Talks:

Date and Time to be Announced

To register, please visit:

www.greaterallegheny.psu.edu/register-summit-talks

Speaker Series:

Date and Time to be Announced

Psychological Influences on Black Women's Health

Panelists will consider trauma, including generational trauma, and other psychological influences that impact Black Women's Health

Summit Talks:

Date and Time to be Announced

To register, please visit:

www.greaterallegheny.psu.edu/register-summit-talks

Speaker Series:

Date and Time to be Announced

Political influences on Black Women's Health

Panelists will consider political and policy influences on Black Women's Health

Summit Talks:

Date and Time to be Announced

To register, please visit:

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