How Talking about Systemic Racism can Lead to Systemic Inclusion

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Systemic racism is an empirical reality in the United States as evidenced by the existence of race-based disparities across institutions. In the wake of an unprecedented focus on police brutality and racial injustice in the United States, the time is now to discuss how racism impacts the physical and mental health of individuals, families, and communities. Many nursing instructors are asking what they can do to address racism and how curriculum reform that includes teaching about systemic racism can look in nursing programs. To promote health equity and to foster equity-minded nurses, nursing instructors need to have the desire, courage, and skill to engage in conversations about systemic racism that can help nursing students become better citizens and better care providers. Students want this content and indicate they expect more of their professors and their nursing programs (Ackerman-Barger et al., 2020; Acosta and Ackerman-Barger, 2016).

McNair, Bensimon and Malcolm-Piqueux (2020) put forth the concept of equity-minded practitioners. They defined these as individuals who focus on and examine “how racism and a pervasive belief in the hierarchy of human value have shaped our systems, policies, and practices. To ignore how structures were designed is to ignore the necessary process for eliminating inequities” (p.6). Metzel and Hansen (2014) proposed the concept of teaching structural competencies in health professions where clinicians focus not only on individual interactions, but on how healthcare delivery systems, policies, and social determinants of health impact health inequalities. Kendi (2019) argues that in order to understand systemic racism we need to understand racist policy which he defines as any measure that produces or sustains racial inequity between racial groups. He further stated that the “only way to undo racism is to consistently identify and describe- and then dismantle it (p. 9)”.

To accomplish this, schools of nursing should include a specific course that teaches about both racism and the social determinants of health. The University of California Betty Irene Moore School of Nursing offers such a course for incoming pre-licensure nursing students in their first quarter of the program. Students continue to explore and apply these concepts through an interprofessional health equity course, a health policy course, and a course on fostering healthy communities. The school also conducts periodic reviews to ensure content is threaded through the curriculum.
Content needs to be taught in such a way that student make both cognitive and affective (emotional) connections with the prevalence and outcomes of inequitable care. This means we need to not only teach the data, but include the real impact that racism has at the personal, local, state-wide, and national levels. Further, students need to understand that their roles as nurses cannot be neutral within a system that continually produces that same race-based inequities. They need to understand that they are central to promoting health equity and the only way to move the needle forward is through action.

a. How racism manifests in healthcare  
b. How racism impacts health

References


