

## Racism, Racial Bias, and Health Disparities: Midwifery's Work Continues

In May, the American College of Nurse-Midwives (ACNM) held its 63rd Annual Meeting & Exhibition in Savannah, Georgia. The theme for this year's meeting, *Giving Voice to the Soul of Midwifery*, celebrates the grand midwives of the Southern United States who are an important part of the history of the midwifery profession. These women:

*were healers and care providers trained in their communities, who attended legions of pregnant women. Grand midwives were central, honored figures who rose from a legacy of slavery and who were critical to women's health care during segregation. They passed down not only their knowledge, but also important cultural traditions and values. Their contributions as pioneers in the care of women cement the legacy of our profession.*<sup>1(p 11)</sup>

Grand midwives have often been referred to as *granny midwives*. Like others, the 2018 Annual Meeting's local committee co-chairs (Eileen Thrower, CNM, PhD; Rita Chesney, CNM; and Desiree Clement, CNM, DNP, APRN, FNP-BC) "prefer the term grand midwives to better express the value of these revered women and the services they offered their communities."<sup>1(p 10)</sup> These midwives "were the primary maternity and reproductive care providers for other enslaved women and many white women in Georgia."<sup>1(p 10)</sup> The grand midwives of the South and their legacy were honored throughout the meeting. This recognition is an important counter to racism and racial bias in midwifery that leads to whitewashing the US history of the profession so that the contributions of midwives of color are not adequately recognized. Grand midwives were fundamental to the foundation upon which today's midwifery profession was built.

This year's Annual Meeting also included the introduction of a new racism and health disparities track. The introduction to this track in the 2018 Annual Meeting Program states:

*Racism is a leading cause of health inequities among people of color. While midwives care for women and families affected by the consequences of racism on health, the ACNM Board of Directors and the Program Committee believe there has been insufficient discourse about racism and health inequities at ACNM's Annual Meetings. Considering that the incidence of maternal morbidity and mortality among women of color in the United States is growing more pronounced and pervasive by the day, we cannot continue to ignore or discount how racism and disparities in health care affect not only the women and families we serve, but also our profession and how we choose to respond to this human crisis.*

*Since 2012, the Program Committee has been working to ensure there is rich content about diversity and inclusion in ACNM's Annual Meeting programs. However, we realize that a focused effort on reducing racism and health*

*disparities in the context of a national agenda is timely and critical to our success and effectiveness as midwives. The ACNM Board of Directors responded to the request of members and charged the Program Committee with the inclusion of a new Racism and Health Disparities track beginning with this year's Annual Meeting. ACNM affirms our responsibility to seek solutions for securing equitable health care for women and their families. We are committed to recognizing the history of privilege that has prevented us as an organization from fully embracing the contributions of all midwife colleagues and students. In addition to education sessions and poster presentations identified within the new track, we have several plenary sessions focused on racism and health disparities as well as social justice for women of color.*<sup>1(p 48)</sup>

The attention to racism and health disparities at the 2018 Annual Meeting was timely at this point in ACNM history when concerted efforts to address racism, diversity, and inclusion in the profession continue. Outgoing ACNM President Lisa Kane Low, CNM, PhD, gave updates on some of these efforts in her Presidential Address. There is now a Diversification and Inclusion Committee institutionalized in the new ACNM volunteer structure, and this group will build upon the work begun by the Diversification and Inclusion Taskforce.<sup>2</sup> Patricia Loftman, CNM, LM, MS, will continue her appointment on the ACNM Board of Directors for a second year as the Midwife of Color ex-officio board member. A Board Composition Taskforce has been created to address representation on the Board of Directors to achieve ACNM's strategic initiatives, including diversity on the board. A Bias Incident Reporting, Transparency and Healing (BIRTH) team was in operation at the Annual Meeting so that anyone present could report and receive a response to incidents of racism or other bias. Dr. Kane Low noted ACNM must "learn from our past mistakes and inappropriate judgement. We have to do better and need to move forward with an active pace."

This call to action coincided with the release of the inaugural ACNM *Position Statement on Racism and Racial Bias*.<sup>3</sup> In an email message to ACNM members announcing the release of this new position statement, Dr. Kane Low wrote:

*This document is a concrete step forward in our commitment to create an inclusive organization and continue our efforts to eliminate racism and racial bias in the midwifery profession and race-based disparities in health care. The rich content includes an action plan with measurable outcomes that we will use to move our efforts forward, including regular updates to the membership on our progress in advancing the steps it outlines. We can and must do better in working together to address institutionalized racism,*



health disparities, and workforce diversity, including our contribution as an organization to these challenges.

In remarks after her induction, incoming ACNM President Susan Stone, CNM, DNSc, voiced her commitment to a statement that includes not only words but also actions and accountability:

*Racism is embedded in our society and that includes our organization. Even though most of us want to believe that we are not biased in any way, that is almost impossible if you have grown up and lived in the United States in the last century. We want to do better, and we need to do better. I am very excited about the new ACNM Position Statement on Racism and Racial Bias. I am excited because it does not just state the problem, it provides an action plan for us to move forward in a meaningful way. I am committed to moving this plan forward. I struggle to understand my own unconscious biases every day. I know that I will make missteps and others will too. I hope that together we can help each other get back on track when that happens. We are midwives after all, committed to making the world a better place.*

Over the past several years, ACNM has devoted increased attention to racism, racial bias, and health disparities. This year's Annual Meeting felt like a turning point where these issues were truly front and center with tangible focus and action. I was inspired by calls for white midwives to move from being allies to accomplices for people of color, including our midwifery colleagues. Accomplices take concrete actions to help end systems of oppression.<sup>4</sup> I will work to be an accomplice, not only as an individual midwife but also as the

Editor-in-Chief of this Journal, and I hope other white midwives will join me in this goal. Midwives have made progress in addressing racism, racial bias, and health disparities, but we still have a long way to go. All of us are needed on this journey. To that end, I leave you with the words of encouragement Keisha L. Goode, PhD, and Linda Janet Holmes, MPA, used in closing their opening keynote address, "Looking Back to Look Forward: Midwives of Color Fulfilling America's Unmet Promise," at the Annual Meeting: "Love, love, love! Work, work, work!"

Frances E. Likis, CNM, NP, DrPH, FACNM, FAAN  
*Editor-in-Chief*

## REFERENCES

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2. Dau KQ. Organizational change in pursuit of health equity. *J Midwifery Womens Health*. 2016;61(6):685-687.
3. American College of Nurse-Midwives. *Racism and Racial Bias Position Statement*. Silver Spring, MD: American College of Nurse-Midwives, 2018. <http://www.midwife.org/ACNM/files/ACNMLibraryData/UPLOADFILENAME/000000000315/PS-Racism-and-Racial-Bias-26-Apr-18.pdf>. Accessed July 5, 2018.
4. Osler J. *Opportunities for White People in the Fight for Racial Justice: Moving from Actor to Ally to Accomplice*. <https://www.whiteaccomplices.org/>. Accessed July 5, 2018.