Reflections on Harriet A. Washington’s Lessons about Racism in Medicine

Harriet A. Washington, MA (Columbia), visited Utah virtually in October as our 2021 Max and Sara Cowan Memorial Speaker. A Writing Fellow in Bioethics at Harvard Medical School, and a Fellow of the New York Academy of Medicine, Washington is the author of Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present. During September and October the Community Read program featured discussions on chapters from both Medical Apartheid and her 2021 book, Carte Blanche: The Erosion of Informed Consent in Medical Research. Second-year medical students in the required Layers of Medicine course had the opportunity to read Medical Apartheid, attend her Cowan presentations, and write a reflection. Below, students and faculty alike reflect on Harriet A Washington’s presentations.

“I was elated that a scholar came to the U of U to address many of the perpetuated Myths surrounding Blackness and the so call “need to treat Black people differently than whites”. I hope that her message and facts become a required part of 1st or 2nd year curriculum in the Schools of Medicine across the nation. I was lucky as a Black man growing up in D.C. to have access to Black Scholars like Ms. Washington. These scholars were able to teach me much of this forgotten history before applying to medical school. Let’s not have her facts stop with her presentation but made into a nonoptional class or part of ethics curriculum. Thank you for bringing her to the SOM.”

Richard Ferguson MD, MBA, Chief Medical Officer, Health Choice Utah, President of Black Physicians of Utah

“Dr. Washington’s work as a scholar is both engaging and enlightening. She lays out medical history providing context using narrative, what was expected at the time, and plainly shows who was harmed. Her reporting creates a big picture view and challenges me to get curious about history to understand our present moment. She also challenges me to see history through a nonwhite lens and start asking, Who benefits? Who is harmed? How does this research contribute to health care vs reinforce racism?” Read her book Medical Apartheid! It’s practice-changing.”

Amy N. Cowan, MD

“I loved hearing Dr. Washington lecture on her work of investigating the ways medical history has been shaped by bias against Black individuals. This experience made me realize how much societal momentum the stories we tell have. Only by exposing past wrongs and finding reasonable solutions can we hope to correct decades of injustice that have bled into today.”

Kayla Blickensderfer, MD Candidate, Class of 2024

“As hard as it is to hear these stories, I can clearly see how important it is to be educated about these issues. These aren’t things that we can just decide to listen to or not listen to. We don’t grow when we are comfortable.”

Chloe Davis, MD Candidate, Class of 2024

“I actively tried to find counter-arguments to understand the importance of Dr. Washington’s claims. However, I could not find them because I completely agree that the history of abuse towards African Americans and minorities should be common knowledge for our society, specifically the medical community, to progress. I was only aware of the Tuskegee experiments and general medical mistreatment towards enslaved persons. It was shocking to learn about the atrocities committed by leaders who “mirrored” the existing distorted beliefs and used them to obtain fame and money in the medical field.”

Guilherme Kuceki, MD Candidate, Class of 2024

“After reading Medical Apartheid, I was excited to hear from Harriet Washington herself during Internal Medicine Grand Rounds and the Evening Ethics talk. During the Evening Ethics talk, I asked the following question: ‘Do you feel that medical research is still “secret”? How do we make medical research and medical knowledge more accessible?’ Her response: ‘Medical Research is still secret! Reports can shroud the truth. They can describe the issue, but not describe it in a way that is meaningful. They may focus on technical aspects, but not on cultural aspects that people care about… You can give information, but if it is not accurate or the right information, then you are hiding information from your patients.’ There is a growing need for correct, relevant, easily understood scientific education, particularly as we see the rise of misinformation and pseudoscientific claims. The onus is on us, the scientific and medical community, to provide this information and remove barriers to understanding, making scientific information intelligible to the general population.”

Steven Groszen, MD Candidate, Class of 2024

“While on vacation this summer, I was reading Medical Apartheid by Harriet Washington at the pool. A black couple approached me to ask about my reading and we had a 4-hour conversation about their experience as black individuals interacting with the healthcare system. I not only learned so much from them, but we also built a beautiful friendship as the week went on. I will never forget how meaningful this conversation was to me and I will continue to hold it in my heart as I continue my training to become a better anti-racist physician.”

Keely Kringlen, MD Candidate, Class of 2024
Evening Ethics Discussions

These informal, multidisciplinary discussions about current issues in health ethics take place approximately bi-monthly or as ethical issues arise. A CHeEtAH faculty member facilitates discussion. Guided by the topic, we invite people with relevant expertise and experience and informed opinions to join us. Generally about 15-60 people from a variety of disciplines, including healthcare, public policy, philosophy, law, and business attend. We distribute short, timely articles from the nation's most thoughtful newspapers, journals, blogs, and magazines to the group in advance of our discussions. CME is offered.

GENETICS HOT TOPICS:
"Ethical concerns related to direct-to-consumer genetic testing for suicide risk and other mental health conditions"
with Anna Docherty, Brent Kious, Teneille Brown, and Leslie Francis

Thursday, December 9, 2021 3:45-4:30pm
Join Zoom: https://us02web.zoom.us/j/581623206
CME offered: Event Code: 343019

Most mental health conditions and symptoms are polygenic, in that their genetic risk is attributable to many gene variants with small individual effects. Even so, polygenic risk scores have been calculated for a variety of mental health conditions and symptoms, including suicide death and suicidal ideation. Some companies have already started to offer direct-to-consumer genetic tests for a variety of mental health conditions, and may soon offer polygenic risk scores for suicide. We examine ethical and legal concerns related to this potential development and consider unique issues related to the direct-to-consumer evaluation of genetic risk for suicide.

Background Readings:

(Country Shakila.Nawaz@utah.edu or Linda.carriee@hsc.utah.edu for pdfs)

Watch: https://ksltv.com/472121/utah-scientists-identifying-genes-that-may-increase-risk-to-suicide/

Vaccine Hesitancy: Role of Moral Values, Political Beliefs, and Conspiracy Theories
with Alyssa Burgart, MD, 2021 David Green Memorial Speaker

Wednesday, January 19, 2022 5:30-7pm
Join Zoom: https://utah.zoom.us/j/95961237652
Passcode: 331465
CME offered: Event Code: 19019

Vaccine hesitancy can encompass a rich tapestry of beliefs, with individual patients and their families influenced by a variety of forces. Understanding the underlying causes of hesitancy can help clinicians identify barriers to vaccination in ways that preserve the patient/clinician relationship and strengthen trust. We will explore the roles of moral values, belief in conspiracy theories, and political beliefs in sharing vaccine acceptance/hesitancy/refusal. Participants may bring their experiences with vaccine hesitancy and we can explore the ethical dimensions of these important, public health conversations. Three articles have been selected to spark conversation:

Alyssa Burgart, MD, MA, FAAP will be our 2022 David Green Memorial Speaker,
Dr. Alyssa Burgart is a board certified pediatric anesthesiologist and bioethicist,
specializing in pediatric anesthesia and pediatric abdominal transplant anesthesia at Stanford Health. She is Clinical Associate Professor, Stanford University, and Medical Director, Stanford Children’s Health, Lucile Packard Children’s Hospital Clinical Ethics Department of Anesthesiology, Perioperative, and Pain Management, Palo Alto, California. Dr. Burgart visits Utah January 19-21, 2022.

There will be two opportunities to hear Dr. Burgart:

- **Vaccine Hesitancy: Role of Moral Values, Political Beliefs, and Conspiracy Theories**
  Wednesday, January 19, 2022, 5:30-7pm, Evening Ethics Discussion
  In person EHSEB Room #1750 and zoom: [https://utah.zoom.us/j/95961237652](https://utah.zoom.us/j/95961237652) passcode: 331465

- **Ethics for Youngsters: Landmark Cases in Pediatric Bioethics**
  Thursday, January 20, 2022, 8-9am, David Green Memorial Lecture (Pediatric Grand Rounds)
  In person PCMC 3rd floor auditorium and [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCNQP-M_3-PdPDvniCr2Fjpg](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCNQP-M_3-PdPDvniCr2Fjpg)

The David Green Memorial Lectureship honors David Green, MD, pediatrician, who, in 1989, was a founding member of the Department of Internal Medicine’s Division of Medical Ethics, now known as The Center for Health Ethics, Arts, and Humanities.

For a song Dr. Burgart wrote “to the Health Care Workers who are burned out, morally injured, and fed up with #Covid 19, “We Keep Trying,” see [https://twitter.com/BurgartBioethix](https://twitter.com/BurgartBioethix)

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**Reckoning with the History of Eugenic Sterilization in Utah**

Thursday, February 3, 2022 noon-1pm
Live stream: [https://medicine.utah.edu/internalmedicine/grand-rounds/gr-livestream-2.php](https://medicine.utah.edu/internalmedicine/grand-rounds/gr-livestream-2.php)

Between 1925 and 1974, approximately 900 people in Utah were subjected to state-sanctioned eugenic sterilization because they were deemed unfit to have children. We have conducted a deidentified demographic analysis of the victims (e.g. gender, race/ethnicity, age at sterilization), which allows for better understanding of who was targeted with the procedure and how that changed over time in response to institutional, state, and national trends. Utah was among the last states in the nation to continue this practice of institutional sterilization, fueling rumors of sterilization survivors. Our demographic analysis permits estimating the number of victims who are still alive.
In her book, *The Vanishing Half*, author Brit Bennett weaves the story of twins Stella and Desiree, who at sixteen leave their hometown in search of identity. Growing up the twins are inseparable, yet unique. They have each internalized the early trauma of their lives but experience it differently in their search for self in a racialized world. Bennett beautifully addresses issues of race, family, and identity in her novel. Issues she raises are especially pertinent today as society continues to struggle with race and its legacy in our history.

Inspired by the upcoming centennial of the 1918 flu pandemic, Emma Donoghue began writing a novel about the historic pandemic a couple of years before Covid-19 hit. Published in early 2020, just as cities around the world were going into lockdown, Donoghue’s novel proved especially timely. The story focuses on the heroic actions of a passionate young nurse named Julia who overcomes incredible obstacles to care for her patients in the makeshift “maternity/fever ward” of an overcrowded, under-resourced Dublin hospital. Many readers find Julia’s commitment to her profession and her patients inspirational. While Julia is a fictional character, the novel is meticulously researched and features an appearance by Dr. Kathleen Lynn, “the rebel doctor,” an actual political leader in Sinn Fein and medical doctor as well as gripping descriptions of clinical practices of the time.

We Are All Perfectly Fine: A Memoir of Love, Medicine and Healing is Jillian Horton’s memoir of addressing her own burnout as a physician, medical educator, parent, and human. The story she tells in this book is centered on her experience at a retreat for burned-out physicians at a Zen center, but reflects on her life well before she became a physician. Although reading a memoir might not seem like a way to approach burnout, in fact, this book came to our attention for Literature and Health Care based on the strong recommendations of faculty and staff at the University of Utah who have found it useful to their own lives and medical practices.

**February’s selection is not available at local booksellers but is widely available online.**
MK Czerwiec, RN, 11/3/21, Evening Ethics:

“Pandemics & Panels: What Have We Learned about Global Health Crises Through Comics?”

CheEtAH planning retreat in person members: Carrie Torr, Teneille Brown, Gretchen Case, Natalia Washington, Brent Kious, Peggy Battin, Linda Carr-Lee Faix, Susan Sample

MK Czerwiec, RN, 11/3/21, signing books for Susan Sample and Donna Baluchi at book sale after Evening Ethics

CheEtAH Calendar of Events

*Literature and Health Care Discussion Group  6-7:30 pm [via zoom]

The Vanishing Half by Brit Bennett, Facilitated by Maureen Mathison, PhD https://utah.zoom.us/j/97709883756 Passcode: 013324 Wed. Dec. 8


We Are All Perfectly Fine: A Memoir of Love, Medicine and Healing by Jillian Horton, MD, Facilitated by Gretchen Case, PhD, MA https://utah.zoom.us/j/99302740105 Passcode: 219771 Wed. Feb. 9

*Evening Ethics  (times as noted)

“Genetics Hot Topics: “Ethical concerns related to direct-to-consumer genetic testing for suicide risk and other mental health conditions,” with Anna Docherty, Brent Kious, Teneille Brown, and Leslie Francis https://us02web.zoom.us/j/581623206 NOTE: time is 3-4:30pm Thurs. Dec. 9

“Vaccine Hesitancy: Role of Moral Values, Political Beliefs, and Conspiracy Theories,” with Alyssa Burgart, MD, MA, FAAP, 2022 David Green Speaker, in person EHSEB room #1750 and https://utah.zoom.us/j/95961237652 Passcode: 331465 Note : time is 5:30-7pm Thurs. Jan. 19

Lectures

David Green Memorial Lecture, Pediatric Grand Rounds, with Alyssa Burgart, MD, MA, FAAP: “Ethics for Youngsters: Landmark Cases in Pediatric Bioethics,” 8-9am, PCH 3rd floor auditorium and https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCNQn-M_3-PdPDvniCR2zfp


Internal Medicine Ethics Resident Conference Seminar Series 2-3pm

Patient Safety and Ethics: The Impaired Physician Thurs. Dec. 23, 30, Jan. 4

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CHeEtAH Core Faculty on the Road and In Print

**Teneille Brown** had an opinion piece in the Washington Post September 23, 2021, titled “Of course hospitals in crisis mode should consider vaccination status.”

**Jim Tabery** discussed vaccine mandates on **ABC4 news, October 27, 2021**.


**Susan J. Sample** presented "Using Clinical Practices of Narrative Medicine to Gain Psychosocial Insights into Adolescent Transplant Patients and Help them Transition to Adult Care" at the Society of Transplant Social Workers' national conference Oct. 21. Earlier that month, her book, Voices of Teenage Transplant Survivors: Miracle-Like, was featured at the Utah Book Festival, sponsored by Utah Humanities. She was joined by 10 transplant recipients who read their poetry and discussed new challenges they’ve faced as young adults.

**Jim Ruble** will be President-elect of the American Society for Pharmacy Law (ASPL). This will be a 3-year leadership cycle, Pres-elect, President, Past-President.