

# Advancing Health Through the Medical Education of Black Physicians: Compelling Contributions From Alumni of a Midwest Medical School

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Black people in the United States experience significant health disparities compared with White people, including lower life expectancy, higher rates of chronic disease, and increased mortality rates, such as infant mortality and mortality from common and chronic conditions.<sup>1</sup> Despite these sobering statistics, Black physicians remain underrepresented in the health care workforce. According to the Association of American Medical Colleges, in 2022, 5.2% of physicians identified as Black, while about 13% of the general population identified as Black.<sup>2</sup> Studies have demonstrated that Black physicians are more likely to serve communities with higher populations of Black and other non-White residents and to address the health care needs of Black individuals.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, racial concordance between patient and provider can improve health outcomes.<sup>4</sup>

Wisconsin is no stranger to racial disparities, particularly in overall health outcomes and maternal and infant mortality. A Commonwealth Fund report released in 2024 found that, among all states, Wisconsin ranks 25th in health care performance, yet ranks 5th worst in performance for Black residents.<sup>5</sup> This same report stated that Black and American Indian and

Alaska Native individuals “live fewer years, on average, than White and Hispanic people and are more likely to die from treatable conditions, more likely to die during or after pregnancy and suffer serious pregnancy-related complications, more likely to lose children in infancy, and are at higher risk for many chronic health condi-

people in Wisconsin and beyond, we turned to our institution’s history, tracing the journey of Black medical students to understand the impact of medical education on their success in becoming physicians, as well as their contributions to medicine.

Records indicate that Jose Escabi, MD, a

**Medical schools across the country have worked for more than half a century to diversify the physician workforce to help optimize health for underserved communities and advance health equity.**

tions, from diabetes to hypertension.”<sup>5</sup> In examining infant mortality, Black infants were 3 times more likely to die before their first birthday than White infants during 2019-2021.<sup>6</sup>

To help address these racial health disparities, many medical schools have developed pathway programs, implemented processes to identify highly qualified students who demonstrate a commitment to improving health in populations with increased disparities, and expanded student support programs to help recruit, retain, and support the development of a diverse student body. Medical schools have also increased their focus on educating learners to become physicians able to address public health issues and advance health equity.

To better understand how the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health (SMPH) has helped to prepare physicians to address the health inequities faced by Black

Black man, graduated from the University of Wisconsin’s early 2-year medical school program in 1919 before earning his medical degree from Harvard University. The school then transitioned to a 4-year medical degree program in 1925. The first Black graduate of the 4-year program was William Tardy, MD, in 1967, who went on to establish a successful psychiatry practice in New York. Since then, more than 270 Black medical graduates from the school have made significant contributions to advance medicine and health outcomes.

The first Black woman to graduate, Ada Fischer, MD, earned her medical degree in 1975 and built an illustrious career in both medicine and politics. Among many accomplishments, she became the first Black woman elected as a committee member for North Carolina at the Republican National Convention and co-drafted the Occupational Health Services Standards of

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Care for corporate America and the Veterans Affairs health system.

Dial Hewlett, MD, class of 1976, served as chief resident at Harlem Hospital before pursuing a fellowship in infectious disease. During the early HIV epidemic, he played a crucial role in expanding access to zidovudine treatment for vulnerable populations. He later became a leader in the pharmaceutical industry and remains a staunch patient advocate. Today, he serves at the Westchester County Department of Health in New York as the medical director, Division of Disease Control, and chief of tuberculosis services.

Daryl Knox, MD, class of 1978, became chief medical officer at one of the nation's largest community mental health centers. A dedicated community advocate, he provided mental health education as a weekly mental health contributor on a local ABC news station. He is a former president of both the Houston Psychiatric Society and the Texas Society for Psychiatric Physicians, and he served in the Assembly for the American Psychiatric Association (APA) as well as on national boards that guide the profession, including the American Association for Emergency Psychiatry.

Salahuddin Abdur-Rahman, MD, class of 1982, completed a residency in internal medicine and then pursued a career in private practice in New Bedford, Massachusetts. After a long career in private practice, he transitioned to correctional medicine at the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation in California and now works part-time in correctional medicine at Bridgewater State Hospital. Although retired, he continues to serve the incarcerated community, providing empathetic care without judgement.

Another graduate, Chris Harris, MD, class of 1987, pursued a career in pediatrics. He currently serves as medical director of Enanta Pharmaceuticals. Throughout his career, he has been a leader and champion of pediatric health initiatives supporting individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, and other sexual and gender minority groups (LGBTQIA+). He is the immediate past chair of the Section on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Health and Wellness of the American Academy of Pediatrics. Additionally, he is a past chair and

current member of GLMA: Health Professionals Advancing LGBTQ+ Equality.

Tito Izard, MD, class of 1996, has been an advocate for addressing health disparities at the local, regional, and national levels. He is president and chief executive officer of Milwaukee Health Services, Inc, a Federally Qualified Health Center in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He has also served as chair of the National Advisory Council for the National Health Service Corps. He and Milwaukee Health Services collaborated with the Medical College of Wisconsin and Froedtert Hospital to develop Wisconsin's first Health Resources and Services Administration-funded Teaching Health Center to address the shortage of physicians of color in Milwaukee.

A more recent graduate, Jasmine Zapata, MD, class of 2013, is an SMPH faculty member who also serves as the chief medical officer and state epidemiologist for maternal child health and chronic diseases at the Wisconsin Department of Health Services. She is the first woman and first minority to serve in this role. She has served as a member of the Governor's Health Equity Council and as co-chair of the Wisconsin Maternal Mortality Review Team, and her research explores health disparities—particularly around Black maternal and infant mortality. She has also founded multiple mentorship programs to encourage young women and girls to pursue careers in medicine.

These are just a few of the many Black alumni from SMPH who have made an incredible impact on their patients, their communities, and the nation as notable leaders in health care.

Through conversations with Black alumni, we learned that as students they fostered a strong sense of community, ensuring each other's success through unwavering support. They spoke of their fellowship and shared commitment to uplifting one another. From forming study groups and passing down invaluable advice to sharing daily meals, they built a network of resilience and solidarity that sustained them through medical school. It is also important to recognize the barriers they overcame as early trailblazers in changing the face of medicine, as numerous alumni shared experiences of discrimination and prejudice.

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the physician workforce to help optimize health for underserved communities and advance health equity.

Since Dr Tardy's graduation in 1967, SMPH has made significant strides in recruiting talented students from all backgrounds. Over the past 58 years, Black medical students who graduated from SMPH have served—and continue to serve—the unique needs of communities in Wisconsin and nationwide in public health, scientific discovery, clinical care, community service, politics, academia, and beyond. Data from the 2024 medical school graduates nationwide shows that a higher percentage of students who identify as underrepresented in medicine (URiM) compared with those who do not identify as URiM express a desire to work in underserved communities and care for underserved patients.<sup>7</sup> By recruiting, educating, and supporting a medical student body ready to serve diverse patients and populations, we can accelerate progress toward eliminating racial, socioeconomic, and geographic health disparities and fostering more equitable health outcomes.

The dismantling of programs that existed prior to June 2023 and that promoted the inclusion and success of individuals from different backgrounds within health professions could have unintended consequences and adversely affect populations already facing increased health disparities and poorer health outcomes. Implementing learner-centric programs that comply with current federal and state laws, with the explicit intent of providing a future physician workforce well equipped and committed to caring for the underserved, is critical. By ensuring the success of highly qualified medical students from all backgrounds, we ensure a healthier future for all.

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