



## Memorandum

**Date** June 19, 2020

**To:** WellSpace Health Colleagues

**From:** A. Jonathan Porteus, Ph.D.  
Chief Executive Officer

**Re:** Mid-Month Message: 1619 – Part IV

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Colleagues,

As the COVID wave came at us in February, our focus on Black History Month was re-directed. I had started a message which I am sending below. In the time that has elapsed, we have been hit with a viral public health crisis that has killed 120,000 people in the United States of America, and almost 5,300 people in California. As with many other public health issues, people of colour have been dying disproportionately and the US Surgeon General is leading the call to action. Black adult Californians have been dying at a rate that is two times the rate that white adult Californians are dying. Latinx American Californians between 18 and 50 have been dying at twice the rate that white adult Californians are dying. And all of the indicators for why the rates of death are so unequal point to the zip code, social determinants of health, and work environment rather than genetic code. COVID-19 does not see colour, but we have conditions of vulnerability due to how our communities have grown over decades / centuries, through redlining, through what kind of accommodation and services are available in communities of colour.

And as we know, the other public health crisis we have faced is that of overt racism in some cases, and unchecked implicit bias in others. And these biases can extend to the institutions we create so we need to also be intentional about programs and services we create and the partnership with other organizations we choose.

One of the ways we break down our implicit biases and stop perpetuating culture that is exclusive is to understand the culture of the different groups that make up the wonderful heterogeneity of our society – and that is where Black History Month comes in. Given history books, media, and even our beliefs that perpetuate a white-focused history, it requires we shift our gaze. So here is my message from February, brought to you coincidentally on Juneteenth, the anniversary of the day in 1865 when a union general in Galveston Texas announced that slaves in the south were free under the Emancipation Declaration that had happened 3 years earlier in 1862. Juneteenth is a state holiday in Texas and a day of observance in California.

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What are the important dates we remember in the American conscience? 1492? 1776? 1861-65? 9/11? 7/4? 12/7?

So what about 1619?

If you were watching the quay at Point Comfort in the English Colony of Virginia in August 1619 you might have seen the ship carrying 20 or more enslaved Africans docking. This was the first known slave ship to the American colonies and, as noted in the NY Times *"no aspect of the country that would be formed here has been untouched by the years of slavery that followed..."* Point Comfort. Many of us have an association to "Plymouth," "Plymouth Rock" or "the Mayflower." That was a year later in 1620 (yes, slaves came before the Pilgrims). But Point Comfort? 1619? 400 years later we can reflect on 246 years of slavery until the Emancipation Declaration of 1862 and 'Abolition' in 1865, or the 345 years until the Civil Rights Act of 1964. 157 years after slavery first landed at Point Comfort, the United States of America were born from the Declaration of Independence on July 4th 1776,. 167 years after slavery first landed at Point Comfort, the Constitution and Bill of Rights (1787) made "all men equal."

246 years of slavery and a slow transition to freedom that was only reinforced by a civil rights law in the 1960s. During these centuries the history of the land was largely written, so it's not a surprise that while slaves were building a Nation the might, wealth and culture of that Nation were credited to the owners of the slaves.

I cannot cover an entire history in a Mid-Month Message, but I think about the work I do and feel that perhaps this is a time when we can reflect on the vital historic contributions of African Americans to some of the work we do at WellSpace Health.

#### HEALTH CARE

- 1847 - **David Jones Peck** graduates from Rush University as the first African American graduate of a US medical School
- 1854 – **John Van Surly DeGrasse** was the first African American member of a Medical Society (Massachusetts Medical Society)
- 1864 – **Rebecca Lee Crumpler** was the first African American woman to become a doctor of medicine in the United States, graduating from the New England Female Medical College
- 1993 – **Jocelyn Elders** became the first African American Surgeon General
- Patient Centered Health Home is a key part of our health delivery system because of its relationship to quality outcomes. Dr **Freda Lewis Hall**, a graduate of Howard University, was appointed to the first federal Board of Governors for the Patient-Centered

Outcomes Research Institute (PCORI) and has been a passionate advocate for the treatment model we embrace.

- **Henrietta Lacks.** Perhaps nobody in the history of medicine has helped so many others with cures and treatments including Polio through multiple types of cancer as Henrietta Lacks. On February 8<sup>th</sup>, 1951, cancer cells were harvested from Ms Lacks and came to be known as HeLa cells (HenriettaLacks). While Henrietta Lacks died in October 1951, over 50 million metric tons of cells used for a wide range of life-saving treatments were grown from what are known as her ‘immortal’ cells. HeLa cells are the be oldest and most used human cell line to be maintained in labs. Henrietta Lacks was unaware of her contribution to humanity.

#### DENTAL

- 1840 – first US dental School refused to train African American dentists
- 1867 – Harvard Dental School accepted its 16 inaugural students amongst whom was **Robert Tanner Freeman.**
- 1890 – **Ida Gray Nelson Rollins** graduates University of Michigan as first African American female dentist

#### BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

- 1920 – **Francis Sumner** became the first African American psychologist.
- 1945 – **Mamie Phipps Clark** became the first African American Woman to earn a doctorate in Clinical Psychology at Columbia and went on to provide testimony in the landmark Brown vs. Board of Education desegregation ruling of 1954.
- 1890s – **Solomon Carter Fuller** was the first African American psychiatrist who performed ground-breaking research in Alzheimer’s patients and worked alongside Alois Alzheimer who first discovered the traits of the disease in 1901.
- **Benny Primm** was the founder and Executive Director of the Addiction Treatment and Research Corporation. He played a powerful role in the public health response in the early days or the AIDS epidemic. Primm was also a highly respected proponent of medically assisted treatments for opioid addiction and used his public health influence to promote methadone maintenance programs. Later he was a presidentially-appointed Director of the federal Center for Substance Abuse Treatment where he furthered these causes and also advocated for co-occurring substance us and mental health disorders treatment. Primm died in 2015 having become one of the most influential figures in the field of addiction and substance abuse treatment.
- **Ronald Williams** – founder of New York Therapeutic Communities and pioneer for alternatives to incarceration programs as well as prison-based residential rehabilitation programs for substance use disorders.

#### SUICIDE PREVENTION

- **Sherry Molock** – professor and clinical psychologist at George Washington focusing on the risk and protective factors for suicide in African American adolescents and young

adults. Dr Molock has also designed various public health and prevention programs for communities of colour, and has focused on help-seeking behaviours in African American adolescents and young adults.

#### **SOCIAL SERVICES**

- **Anna Julia Cooper** – was born in to slavery but earned a doctorate from the university of Paris-Sorbonne in 1924. Considered to be one of the most important scholars in US history who also guided the development of American sociology. Cooper focused on education for Black girls and women as the primary vehicle to the progress of people of colour following slavery.
- **Frantz Omar Fanon** - was a physician and psychiatrist whose work in the mid-1900s. His medical work focused on the health consequences of living in colonialism and the mental health effects of decolonization (a major global transition in the 1950s). his work was impactful in sociology, anthropology, and public health.
- **Nadine Burke Harris** – pediatrician and researcher, and first Surgeon General of California. Burke Harris is known for her work linking adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and toxic stress with harmful effects to health later in life.

This is the fourth part of my June Mid-Month Message, all of the others can be found below in the remainder of the email.

Be well,

Jonathan