

A message to those who are the participants, and our partners, in research:

Events over the past few months in our state, nation, and world have reminded us of the significance of health and the importance of fairness, equity, and inclusion. While the COVID-19 pandemic certainly has captured our attention and worries, and perhaps changed our lives forever, the horrific killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Rayshar Brooks, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor, and so many others, have brought about a movement to bring racial inequities and inequalities to the forefront, and to produce societal change. I welcome and support that change. There is a reality that is lived every day by individuals from minority racial and ethnic groups, and other cultural groups, that must change, and that demands action. With this statement, I join with colleagues at [West Virginia University \(WVU\)](#), including its [Division of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion](#) and [Health Sciences Center](#), to stand united against individual and institutional racism toward Black people.

For over two decades, our Center for Oral Health Research in Appalachia (COHRA) in West Virginia, with colleagues in Pittsburgh, as well as the Anxiety, Psychophysiology, and Pain Research Laboratory at WVU, have been working with families, including women and children, to promote health and to understand the many ways in which health and health care are not equally distributed across our society. One of our projects, COHRA Smile, specifically focuses on the health of Black women and their children, in part addressing the effects of racial discrimination on health and healthcare.

In these tumultuous times, we can learn from the concept of “cultural safety” that arose from the experiences and work of Māori nurses in New Zealand/Aotearoa. Cultural safety speaks to an “environment that is safe for people: where there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity, of who they are and what they need. It is about shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge and experience of learning, living and working together with dignity and truly listening.” (Williams, 1999). We can, should, and must work together to promote cultural safety for those who identify as Black or African American, and for all groups in our state and nation. I join with others in the condemnation of all violence, including that which is racially- and ethnically-based, and I advocate for equity, justice, and cultural safety.

The research in which all are engaged, including participants, staff, and investigators, is focused on knowledge, learning about health and how to make life better. The words of a native West Virginian, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., apply to our work: “The first step toward tolerance is respect and the first step toward respect is knowledge.” Originally from Mineral county, West Virginia, Dr. Gates is the Alphonse Fletcher University Professor and Director of the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research at Harvard University. As Dr. Gates said, tolerance is only the first step. Clearly, we must move forward now beyond tolerance toward true racial equity and inclusiveness.

Not only do Black Lives Matter, but Black Health Matters, too. In my roles as a mentor of students, researcher, principal investigator of grant projects, psychologist, and professor, I want to state explicitly that Black lives and Black health matter to me personally. I am so thankful for participation in our research by families and children of all races and backgrounds, and the involvement of community agencies throughout our state. Together, we can promote health, especially the health of those from marginalized communities, of children, their parents and caregivers, and families, in West Virginia and beyond.

Sincerely,

Daniel W. McNeil, PhD