

Plenary speaker: Pediatricians can use their influence to promote a more equitable society

October 28, 2019

Alyson Sulaski Wyckoff, Associate Editor

Article type: [AAP National Conference & Exhibition](#)

Topics: [Advocacy](#), [Diversity](#), [equity and inclusion](#)

Editor's note: *The 2019 AAP National Conference & Exhibition will take place from Oct. 25-29 in New Orleans.*



Gail Christopher's inspiration to work toward racial equity in society began with tragic news in a doctor's office.

When she brought her daughter in for a six-week checkup, she learned the newborn had a congenital heart defect, Tetralogy of Fallot. Doctors said nothing could be done until she was 5 years old and to take her home.

The baby died a few weeks later.

It wasn't until 20 years later that Dr. Christopher, D.N., N.D., learned the surgery that could have saved her daughter's life was invented in the 1940s, 30 years before the child was born. The amazing irony, Dr. Christopher said, was that the surgery had been invented by an African American man.

"Now, I'll never know why that option was not offered to us as young parents. I think (of my daughter) as an angel who came into my life and started me on my trajectory to work toward racial healing," said Dr. Christopher, who gave a plenary talk Monday titled "Overcoming the Belief in a Hierarchy of Human Value: An Opportunity and Imperative for Pediatricians."

The former senior adviser and vice president of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Dr. Christopher is founder and president of Ntianu Garden: Center for Healing and Nature. Her Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation

initiative, launched by the Kellogg Foundation, supports efforts to jettison the false belief in a hierarchy of human value.

She called on pediatricians to join her in the journey to reject the notion that some people are superior or inferior based on their physical characteristics. Dr. Christopher praised the recent AAP policy statement that documents the harms faced by children who experience racism.

“I want to reinforce how proud I am of this organization in stepping up and taking a leadership role in this work,” Dr. Christopher said.

Most children in America today are children of color, she said, and most will face barriers that make them more vulnerable to disease and illness, like asthma, obesity and mental health challenges. Research from adverse childhood experiences, trauma-informed care and social determinants of health demonstrates that chronic stress increases vulnerability to disease. It’s important to create the right environment to help mitigate this stress.

Pediatricians can use their influence to help create a more equitable society, she said. Building trusting relationships is one way to begin that process by “making everyone that comes into our space not only welcome but safe.”

As community leaders, pediatricians can take a stand against policies designed to maintain separation, including residential segregation, lack of access to transportation, and exclusionary and suspension laws in schools.

“It becomes even more urgent that ... those of us who care about children have to recognize that the legacy of the belief in a hierarchy of human value has no place in the 21st century,” she said.

“I encourage you as an organization, as leaders, as physicians, to make a stand that says, ‘no more racial inequity, no more unfair treatment,’” Dr. Christopher said. “We are indeed one expanded human family. We can, we should, indeed we must, extend love and grace and human compassion to all.”

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