

## Plenary speaker: Pediatricians need to provide more than health care

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Thirteen years ago, Omolara Thomas Uwemedimo M.D., M.P.H., checked on her favorite patient, Grace, a 12-month-old fighting HIV at Kamuzu Central Hospital in Lilongwe, Malawi. When Dr. Uwemedimo arrived at Grace’s room, she saw an empty cot and was overcome with sadness.

As she sat with Grace’s aunt and cried, Dr. Uwemedimo realized the version of pediatrics she had been taught failed the little girl. It’s not enough to only give patients health care.

“After Grace, I learned that when we fight to change children’s circumstances, that is how we keep children healthy. That is socially responsive pediatrics.”

During her plenary address Monday, Dr. Uwemedimo explained the components of socially responsive pediatrics and how pediatricians can incorporate it into their practices.

Dr. Uwemedimo spent her early career in other countries where health inequity was common. When she returned to the U.S., she noticed the same challenges.

“The solutions I used globally could be used right here with groups that didn’t have the protections to access high-quality medical care,” said Dr. Uwemedimo, an assistant professor of pediatrics and occupational medicine at Hofstra Northwell School of Medicine.

One of these solutions is to practice socially responsive care.

Dr. Uwemedimo, who also is director of the Global Health Program at Cohen Children’s Medical Center of New York, discussed how she teaches social responsiveness to residents.

“We help them learn to clarify (patients’) needs, set foundations for collaborative relationships, identify and discuss experiences, and talk about tough things like mistrust, stigma and racism,” Dr. Uwemedimo said.

“We missed the boat when we don’t recognize families who are dealing with separation due to deportation or incarceration, or families dealing with deteriorating schools and overcrowding, or residential segregation and police brutality,” she continued. “It’s important that we realize how big this idea is and that we can’t do it alone. We need community partners.”

Dr. Uwemedimo put her community-based plan into action when she and two coworkers created Strong Children Wellness, which integrates medical, social and mental health services in New York City.

“Strong Children Wellness allows for community-based organizations and physical health practices to sit side by side without hierarchy, knowing and valuing the mutual benefits that each other gives,” Dr. Uwemedimo said.

She also discussed the importance of advocacy and how pediatricians must use their privilege to enact change.

“Advocacy and empowerment is the only way to true justice,” Dr. Uwemedimo said. “We can advocate through journal articles, features, Twitter, social media or going to the masses and attending a rally.”

Dr. Uwemedimo reminded the audience of the four E’s of socially responsive medicine: engage, empower, establish community resources and encourage action.

“It is all for naught if it’s not for action,” Dr. Uwemedimo said. “We must recognize the systemic barriers, but only through action and demands will we be able to break them down and move forward.”