Morehouse School of Medicine Looks to Disrupt Health Inequities

A new Global Health Equity Institute is in the works named after former U.S. Surgeon General Dr. David Satcher.
At Morehouse School of Medicine (MSM), disrupting and erasing health disparities is more than just part of their mission statement. Health equity is something MSM leaders, faculty members, and students work toward every day.

"As a medical school, our first priority is to train physicians, researchers, and other healthcare professionals. However, as an institution, we are committed to being part of the solution," says Dr. Valerie Montgomery Rice, president and CEO of MSM. "African Americans and people of color continue to face challenging health disparities when compared to whites. For example, blacks suffer higher incidence of diabetes, heart disease, and some cancers."

That's why Montgomery Rice and other experts are excited about the $2 million donation received in September from the Crof Family Foundation for the development of the David Satcher Global Health Equity Institute at MSM. Dr. David Satcher is the former president of MSM and an expert and leader in equitable scientific and health policies and practices. He also served as U.S. Surgeon General during President Bill Clinton's administration.

"It is incredibly important for an HBCU to have a global institute to address health equity not only in the United States, but around the world," says Montgomery Rice.

The new institute has ambitious goals. "Among its goals are diversifying the scientific and public health workforce, which is overwhelmingly white," Montgomery Rice said. According to 2021 research by the Association of American Medical Colleges, 63.9% of all practicing U.S. physicians are white. Many studies have revealed that the presence of diverse doctors on a patient's care team greatly increases the quality of care and the likelihood that patients will follow through with advanced treatments.

"The institute will also connect its students with the healthcare inequities seen around the world, helping them to dream up solutions to systemic problems, particularly in low-resource areas with higher populations of poorer or rural residents. Data from the World Health Organization (WHO) show a much higher concentration of physicians in wealthier countries. The institute will develop the Office of Global Policy and Advocacy, which will aim to influence legislation and change the narratives that create healthcare barriers around the world."

Making a commitment

The Crof Family Foundation gave $2 million to the institute and issued a promise to help MSM acquire the remaining $18 million needed to get the institute up and running. The Crof Family Foundation is led by Len Crof, a Morehouse College alumnus and his wife Donna Crof.

"We are committed to supporting the next generation of leaders in global health equity," Len Crof said.

Says his experience at Morehouse College instilled the "values of responsibility, leadership, and service" in him, adding that he and his wife are passionate advocates for global health access and equity. "We believe in the mission of the Satcher Global Health Equity Institute and their role in the creation and advancement of health equity to achieve health justice," says Len Crof. "If we broaden diversity in the healthcare, scientific, and public health workforce and provide access to health solutions for under-represented global populations, we can drastically improve quality of life and access to research, wellness, and scientific capital."

The Crof's plan to connect the institute with scientific study programs across the globe in places like Ghana, Senegal, and Rwanda.

"Larger scale programs will include developing a program in public health policy," he says. "We want to do more than study equity."

We already know this is a huge problem that affects not only the health of underprivileged people, but has an impact on all of us. We need the world's institute to be activist-oriented and focus on implementing change." Montgomery Rice says raising funds will require a call to "Justice-minded people, who care about achieving equitable health care for all people."

"Like those who understand that inequity often comes from misinformation and disinformation. Those who want all young people to reach their full potential so they can contribute to scientific advances, public health, and global health," says Montgomery Rice. "Achieving equity in health care and education is everyone's best interest from a population health perspective, a business perspective, and a moral perspective."

Prioritizing health equity

Graham credits leaders like Montgomery Rice at MSM for understanding and prioritizing health equity, especially since diversity in medical schools has been placed at risk after the June 29 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that banned the consideration of race in admissions. It's a place like HBCUs and HSIUS, which Graham says have always been important to closing the equity gap in medicine, where students who might be overlooked at predominantly white institutions can come to learn and thrive.

"From my perspective, after 40 years in academic medical schools or government labs training medical students, residents, doctoral students, and postdoctoral fellows, there are a lot of highly talented and motivated students who are sometimes overlooked or dismissed under typical circumstances," says Graham. "I believe there is an abundance of untapped potential for innovation and discovery and new perspectives among the students and faculty at MSM that the world cannot afford to lose."

Graham says achieving medical equity across the world and in the U.S. will require more diverse perspectives and experiences in physicians and public health officials, including those who make decisions about what biomedical interventions to research and invest in.

"We have so many problems to solve in primary health care, pandemic preparedness, maternal health, mental health, application of new technologies, and a myriad of other areas to which MSM can uniquely contribute," says Graham. "Our students are our greatest asset and most of the investment will be in them. That part will start immediately."