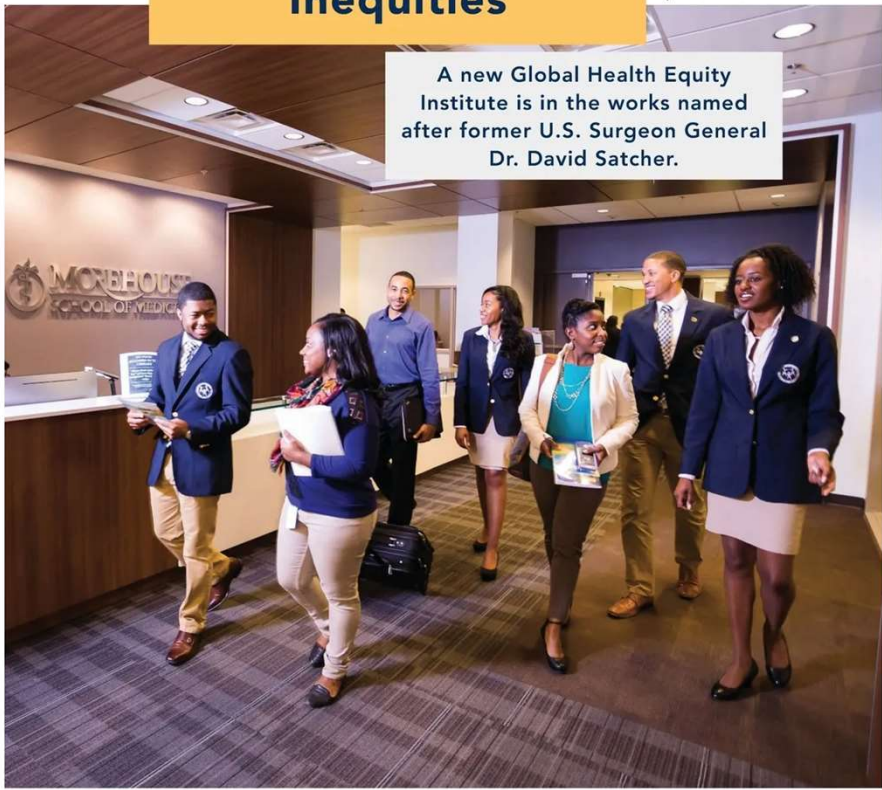




Morehouse School of Medicine Looks to Disrupt Health Inequities

By Liann Herder



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 historically Black medical school (HBMS), we have a larger mission," 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 incidences of diabetes, heart disease, and some cancers."

That's why Montgomery Rice and other experts are excited about the \$2 million donation they received in September from the Croel 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 HBMS 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 an ambitious mission. Among its goals are diversifying the scientific and public health workforce, which is overwhelmingly white. According to 2022 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 that care and the likelihood that patients will follow-through with advised 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 Croel 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 Croel Family Foundation is helmed by Jon Croel, a Morehouse College alumnus, and his wife Donna Croel.

Morehouse College, an historically Black college and university (HBCU) in Atlanta, Georgia, was the birthplace of MSM. But since 1981, MSM has been its own, independent institution. Jon Croel

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 Jon Croel. "If we broaden diversity in the healthcare, scientific, and public health workforces and provide access to health solutions for under-resourced global populations, we can drastically improve quality of life and access to research, wellness, and scientific capital."

The Croels chose to honor a specific MSM physician and professor, Dr. Barney Graham, with their gift. Jon Croel met Graham in 2023 and was impressed by Graham's work on the COVID-19 vaccine.

"Not only is Dr. Graham one of the world's top vaccine researchers, now at MSM, he will be working to teach and expand how treatments and therapies can reach people around the world and where it's needed most," says Jon Croel. "He is also a credible and authentic role model for diverse students seeking a career in science."

Graham will be the institute's inaugural director. He arrived at MSM in May 2022 after two decades with the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, where his research helped in the development of vaccines for upper-respiratory illnesses like COVID and RSV, as well as HIV and other

viruses.

Although he knew the Croels were interested in supporting the Global Health Equity Institute, Graham says he did not know the gift was made until shortly before the conference in September.

"The Croels had two major desires. One was to support HBCUs in general, and secondly to support global health equity in particular," says Graham. "MSM has 'equity' in its mission statement — it's been the goal of the institution since its beginning in 1975."

Graham notes that, since the COVID-19 pandemic, MSM experienced an increase in its class size and programs, which allowed MSM and its board to cast their eye on a bigger target — not just ending health disparity in the U.S. but around the world.

The Croels plan to connect with MSM donors and others to inspire them to help fill the remaining \$18 million gap for the institute. Graham says he hopes to go even farther.

"My goal is to raise at least \$150 million to endow the core functions of the office and to provide tuition relief for students interested in careers in public health and science," says Graham. "Health equity is an aspirational goal and may not ever be fully achieved. That is why I think it is critical this work is endowed and not just funded year by year."

Graham has plans to connect the institute with scientific study programs across the globe in places like Ghana, Senegal, and Rwanda.

"Longer term plans will include developing a program in public health policy," he says. "We want to do more than study equity.



Dr. Barney Graham

We already know this is a huge problem that affects not only the health of impoverished people, but has an impact on all of us. We focused the work of the institute to be action-oriented and be focused on implementing change."

Montgomery Rice says raising funds will require a connection to "like-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 in 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 places like HBCUs and HBMS, 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." □



Dr. Valerie Montgomery Rice