

Dear Students, Residents, Fellows, Staff, and Faculty:

I rarely send out messages in response to national events, but the past several days have been deeply disturbing to me. Although I am the dean of the medical school, what I have witnessed in the news has had a profound effect on me, and at times has made me emotional. As an African American male, I know firsthand what is driving the angst and unrest. I also know that sense of vulnerability of being a black male in this society, and this is despite having achieved great success during my career. I have been profiled while in stores or when driving my car. I remember teaching my son what to say and do if he was stopped by the police. The several events that involve black males dying in encounters with police - such as George Floyd, or the wanton killing of a black male taking a jog through a neighborhood – tell me that my son will likely need to have those same conversations with his sons, my grandsons. I grew up in the 1960s and, yet, despite 60 plus years later, we are facing the same issues. It makes me very sad.

My parents were very active in the civil rights movement in the 1960s. In the mid-1950s, my parents moved our family from southwest Philadelphia to the outskirts of the city in northeast Philadelphia to live in what I believe was the nation's first planned integrated community. There were two white households in between each black household. The community, itself, was also very active in civil rights. I remember my parents and neighbors leaving home to get on a bus to go see Martin Luther King Jr. speak in Washington, DC. It was 1963, when Dr. King gave the now famous "I have a dream" speech. Although I was very young, I knew the climate in the country was very tense, and my siblings and I did not know if my parents would come home safely. I also remember the day Dr. King was assassinated, and watching both of my parents weeping openly. It appeared that all hope for civil rights were lost that day.

I believe the current climate we are experiencing is not ascribed to one event of police brutality. Instead, I believe we are seeing the result of institutional/structural racism in our society that has led to inequalities in opportunities, manifested by high unemployment, lack of educational opportunities, and profound disparities in health care. The pandemic, alone, resulting in the disproportionate number of deaths occurring among African Americans, has cast a very bright light on health care disparities in the African American population and other communities of color.

While I am dismayed and saddened by current events, I do believe our nation is better than this. We must reconcile the inequities and injustices of the past in order to make gains in the future. We, together, can get past this, but now is a time of mourning and reflection. I know many of you reading this are sad, scared, or feel exposed without shelter. Please know that I am aware, and the UVA School of Medicine is a "safe place" for all of you.

My office stands ready to assist anyone who may be in need during this time of turmoil. We, and our nation will get through this, and it will take efforts from all us to get there. Please take care.

Sincerely,
David

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