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JAMA editor is placed on leave after controversial podcast on structural racism

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Howard Bauchner, the editor in chief of the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*, was placed on administrative leave last week (25 March) after controversy over a podcast on racism in medicine hosted by deputy editor Ed Livingston.¹

The podcast has been withdrawn, Livingston has resigned, and Bauchner posted an apology online.² He said, “Comments made in the podcast were inaccurate, offensive, hurtful, and inconsistent with the standards of *JAMA*.” James Madara, head of the American Medical Association, which publishes *JAMA*, also apologised for the podcast.

Phil Fontanarosa, *JAMA*’s executive editor, will serve as interim editor, according to *Medpage Today*, which quoted a statement that has not been posted publicly. The statement by the American Medical Association’s journal oversight committee said it would investigate how the podcast and its promotional tweet were developed, and that it had hired outside investigators from the Zuber Lawler law firm. It said that placing Bauchner on leave “neither implicates nor exonerates him and is standard operating procedure.”³

Bauchner, who has been editor in chief of *JAMA* since 2011, is a professor of paediatrics and community health sciences and assistant dean at Boston University School of Medicine. He has been on leave to serve as editor of *JAMA*. He was previously the first US based editor in chief of the *Archives of Disease in Childhood*, the official publication of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health in the UK, which is published by BMJ. He was elected to the National Academy of Medicine in 2015.

The JAMA Network podcast on 24 February was promoted in a tweet as, “No physician is racist, so how can there be structural racism in healthcare? An explanation of the idea by doctors for doctors in this user friendly podcast.” It featured Livingston, then deputy editor of *JAMA*, in a discussion with Mitchell Katz, president of New York Health and Hospitals and a deputy editor of *JAMA Internal Medicine*. Livingston said that the problem was socioeconomic status rather than racism. Katz disagreed, saying racism existed and should be eliminated.¹

The BMJ asked JAMA Network to view or read a transcript of the podcast but was refused because it had been removed.

A petition on change.org, organised by the Institute for Antiracism in Medicine and signed by over 7000 people, asked for a review of Bauchner’s leadership, a restructuring of *JAMA*’s editorial staff, and for scheduling town hall meetings with “black, indigenous, and people of colour patients, healthcare staff, and allies.”⁴

The Institute for Antiracism in Medicine was founded by three black women physicians in Chicago in the wake of the covid-19 pandemic and the 2020 death of George Floyd at the hands of police. The institute says it is a “civil rights organisation dedicated to the abolition of racism in the field of medicine.”

Correction: On 30 March 2021 we amended this article to state that Howard Bauchner was previously (not currently) editor in chief of the Archives of Disease in Childhood.

- 1 Tanne JH. JAMA deputy editor resigns after critics hit out at podcast on structural racism. *BMJ* 2021;372:n768. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n768 pmid: 33737405
- 2 Bauchner H. Structural racism for doctors: what is it? An apology. *JAMA* 2021. <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/pages/audio-18587774>.
- 3 Fiore K. JAMA boss snared in racism podcast controversy. *Medpage Today*. 26 March 2021. www.medpagetoday.com/publichealthpolicy/generalprofessionalissues/91817
- 4 Institute for Antiracism in Medicine. <https://whatismedicine.com>