Race, racism, and health: global learning for national action

The NHS Race and Health Observatory’s inaugural conference

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The BMJ’s special issue on racism in medicine, published in February 2020, highlighted the chronic failure to tackle racial inequity in the NHS. 1 It called for, and led to the launch of, a health observatory to identify actionable, evidence based policy recommendations for change. 2 Two years on, the NHS Race and Health Observatory is committed to being a resource that combines the qualities of academic and state based intelligence gathering, recognises priorities and highlights issues, and is able to guide policy to reduce inequities in health.

As part of its strategy, the observatory is committed to global collaboration. It works with national and international organisations and stakeholders to share innovative research, practice, and learning. For example, the observatory is twinned with the Office of Minority Health and Health Equity at the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Cross cultural commonalities show promise in reducing health inequalities for ethnic minority and majority ethnic populations whose health outcomes are far below the societal average.

Sharing knowledge and practice

The NHS observatory has assembled race, ethnicity, and health expertise from across the globe, from Australasia to Africa, South and North America, Europe, and Asia. These experts are already beginning to share solutions to common challenges on ethnic and racial health inequalities. They are examining global perspectives on wide ranging topics, including maternal health, infant mortality, lessons from covid-19, racism in the workplace, and indigenous healthcare. But we know that research is worth little if people aren’t willing to act on it. The observatory is therefore extracting actionable insights and practical recommendations that are applicable to the English NHS as well as other health systems.

On 7 and 8 July 2022, the observatory, supported by The BMJ, will bring together its global experts on race and health for an inaugural international conference on race, racism, and health. This virtual event will be a unique opportunity for the NHS and other national health systems to learn and identify pragmatic policies to undo the “causes of the causes” of ethnic health inequalities. Our aim is to present health professionals, policy makers, leaders, academics, and researchers with the latest evidence based solutions and knowledge to tackle those challenges head on.

The opportunities are clear. The NHS, for example, is undergoing another restructure: the emphasis is on integrated care across systems, places, and populations. 3 Reduction of health inequalities is specifically included as a measure of success, which is an opportunity to embed tackling racial inequality at the heart of new ways of working with actions that match the scale of the challenge. The covid-19 pandemic has reminded us that racism and racial inequalities do not respect boundaries or borders. The consequences of racism and disadvantage are not confined to ethnic minority patients, communities, and workers: equity matters because it benefits everyone.