Black History Month and Pioneering African American Physicians

Both American Heart Month and Black History Month are celebrated in February. While one provides an important opportunity to focus on the burden of cardiovascular disease, the other celebrates the contributions of African Americans over the course of history. In this month’s installment of Harold on History, I think it’s fitting to combine the two and focus on some of the pioneering African American physicians who have made seminal contributions to transforming cardiovascular care and improving heart health.

Daniel Hale Williams, MD (1856-1931): Williams was one of Chicago’s first African American physicians upon his graduation from Northwestern Medical School in 1883. In 1891, he founded Chicago’s Provident Hospital and Training School for Nurses which became the first black-owned and operated non-segregated hospital in the U.S. that also provided education and training for black physicians and nurses. In 1893, Williams was one of the first physicians to perform successful open-heart surgery, operating on the pericardium to repair a stab wound to the chest. Two years later, he founded the National Medical Association as a professional organization for black medical practitioners. He became a charter member and the first African American physician in the American College of Surgeons in 1913.

Edward William Hawthorne, PhD, MD, FACC (1920-1986): A professor and head of the department of physiology at Howard University and dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, Hawthorne pioneered the use of large animal research in cardiovascular physiology and performed seminal investigations in myocardial contractility and cardiac muscle mechanics. He was a nationally recognized specialist in cardiovascular research and the causes of hypertension.

John Beauregard Johnson, MD, FACC (1908-1972): A professor and head of the Howard University Department of Medicine in 1949, Johnson was a pioneer in using angiography and cardiac catheterization as diagnostic tools. He was also one of the first cardiologists to focus on the disparate effects of hypertension among African Americans. Johnson is also recognized as the first African American physician to be elected as a fellow of ACC.

Vivien Theodore Thomas, MD (1910-1985): Without any education past high school, Thomas rose above poverty and racism to become a cardiac surgeon pioneer and a teacher of operative techniques to many of the country’s most prominent surgeons. As a surgical technician, Thomas developed the procedures used to treat blue baby syndrome in the 1940s. He was the assistant to surgeon Alfred Blalock, MD, in Blalock’s experimental animal laboratory at Vanderbilt and later at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, MD. In 1976, he was awarded an honorary doctorate and named an instructor of surgery for Johns Hopkins School of Medicine.

Elijah Saunders, MD, FACC (1935-2015): Saunders literally wrote the book on hypertension in African Americans. He is also recognized for his pioneering patient education efforts to raise awareness of high blood pressure in churches and barbershops throughout the state of Maryland.

Edward Sawyer Cooper, MD: Cooper was the first African American to receive tenure as a full professor at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine in 1972. He was elected as the first African American President of the American Heart Association in 1992 and chaired the writing committee that produced the scientific statement on Cardiovascular Disease and Stroke in African-American and Other Racial Minorities.

Charles L. Curry, MD, FACC: The first African American to receive training in cardiology at Duke University, Curry also became the first African American to receive board certification from the American Board of Internal Medicine. He served as director of cardiology at Howard University for 30 years and was the first African American to serve on ACC’s Board of Trustees.

Richard Allen Williams, MD, FACC: Williams founded the Association of Black Cardiologists in 1974 with a focus on promoting the prevention and treatment of cardiovascular disease, including stroke, in African Americans and other minorities and to achieve health equity through the elimination of disparities in all people of color. He also authored the 900-page Textbook of Black-Related Cardiovascular Disease and Stroke in 1975, which detailed medical conditions unique to African Americans.

Edith Irby Jones, MD: Admitted to the University of Arkansas College of Medicine in 1948, Jones was the first African American to enroll in an all-white medical school in the South. In 1959, she became the first African American female resident in the Baylor College of Medicine Affiliated Hospitals in Houston. In 1985 she was elected as the first female president of the National Medical Association. She has been a vocal advocate against health care disparities.

Jay Brown, MD, FACC (1944-1994): As chief of cardiology at Harlem Hospital in New York City, Brown was credited with rebuilding Harlem Hospital’s acute coronary care unit. He was the project director for the Heart of Harlem Healthy Heart Program and developed new approaches to preventing cardiovascular disease in inner-city areas ranging from church-based health programs to promotion of healthy foods in groceries and restaurants.

Trenton Mieres, MD, PhD, FACC (1944-1990): An epidemiologist, researcher and author, Savage played a pivotal role in the establishment and operation of the minority section of the Framingham Heart Study. He is also credited for the establishment of left ventricular hypertrophy as an independent risk factor for sudden cardiac death.

This list is by no means comprehensive. Celebrate African Americans in cardiology on Twitter by sharing your favorite photo. Use #TheFaceOfCardiology and #HeartMonth in your posts. Don’t forget to tag @ACCInTouch.

Harold on History
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