

AspiringDocs.org Meet the Experts Podcast Transcript

Why Is It Important That More Minority Students Go into Medicine?

Charles Terrell, Ed.D., Chief Diversity Office for the AAMC, speaks about the importance of more racial and ethnic diversity among medical students and the physician workforce.

Eric Weissman: Thank you for joining us for the AAMC and AspiringDocs.org Meet The Experts Podcast. I'm Eric Weissman, with the Association of American Medical Colleges. Today we're focusing on why diversity matters in medical education with Dr. Charles Terrell, the vice president of the Division of Diversity Policy and Programs here at the AAMC. Charles has worked in academia for 35 years and has more than 30 years experience, dedicated to increasing diversity in medical and health profession education. Charles Terrell, thank you for joining us.

So let's begin the conversation with a very general question, why is it important that more students of color think about going into medicine?

Dr. Charles Terrell: Thank Eric, I am happy to be here with you today. I think it's incredibly important for students of color to consider careers in medicine because I do think that we need to change the face of medicine to reflect the face of America. Currently the major under-represented groups in medicine, Native Americans, African Americans and Latinos comprise just under 7 percent of the physician population and in the not too distant future these groups are going to make up of arguably over half of our population when

we include other groups of color. Traditionally under-represented groups are terribly under-represented and there are a host of problems that I think we can have a positive impact on, if students of color consider careers in medicine. I think we would do a better job in promoting cultural competency; we might even be able to have an impact on redressing healthcare disparities.

Eric Weissman: When you talk about that 7 percent of physician population, is that a group of physicians who are generally older or younger making up that 7 percent?

Dr. Charles Terrell: I think it's the entire age range of practicing physicians.

Eric Weissman: And is there a particular benefit in getting younger people who haven't decided to go to medical school particularly those people interested in joining a career in medicine now. How does that make a difference?

Dr. Charles Terrell: Absolutely, of course the earlier we get students interested in careers in medicine, the longer they are going to practice. And I think we also bring in their cultural affinities. There are so many generational differences, and things that I just don't remotely understand with students who are younger than I am. And so it's very important I think to have representatives of all generations interested in careers in medicine.

Eric Weissman: And so, if there is someone who is an undergraduate in school and is considering a career in medicine, what kind of questions

should they ask themselves about themselves? How do they know whether medicine is the right career for them?

Dr. Charles Terrell: I think it's great if it's a calling if they feel that, "this is something that I want to do, I've always wanted to do." But also I think they have to measure their interest in medicine against their interest in becoming a dancer, a singer, a painter, and then begin to explore how all of the things that they are interested in, might impact them in the future. How it makes them feel when they think about becoming something if they feel like, "yeah this is really what I want to do."

Eric Weissman: Right. What's interesting about what you just said however is, while they may have a calling to go into medicine or a calling to go into something else, be it the arts, or literature or politics or whatever, what I think makes medicine a little bit different are the barriers to get there. To get into medical school and then become a doctor, we're talking about a potentially expensive proposition. So let's just deal with the money issue as one big barrier, so what do you say to someone who says I don't have the money to go into medical school? Maybe you're dealing with people who come from families that don't have much money or they've never had much money, so how do you get over that very big issue?

Dr. Charles Terrell: Well first of all let me say that I think we can view barriers or challenges, I believe that just about anything that anyone wants to do will come with challenges that have to be overcome in order to

be successful and medicine is just another field with challenges that have to be overcome. Having spent a good twenty years of my career being responsible for funding health profession students, particularly medical students, I certainly wouldn't minimize the impact of cost and debt on pursuing a career in medicine. But what I tell students when I'm advising them on financing either a higher education or medical education is that, that is what financial aid is for. We have an extraordinarily viable financial aid system in this country, and it's really designed to make up the difference between what an individual and his or her family can afford and what the cost are. So for virtually every medical school in this country, there are financing mechanisms that will allow students to adequately pursue a career in medicine and discharge all of the costs. Now quite often this is going to involve incurring a significant amount of debt but I like to look at the debt as an investment. And I do think that if students talk to professionals in the field of medicine as well as professionals in student affairs and financial aid offices, they would get the kind of advice that would allow them to make an informed decision about whether the financial challenges are challenges that they want to undertake.

Eric Weissman: I think it's interesting that you refer to the debt that they may incur will likely encourage students, will likely incur as an investment rather than just simply a debt. Another potential barrier or as you said it challenge is the length of time that it takes to go to medical

school. So it's not just one year of incurring this debt but it's several years and then there are other years of training after school itself. So how do you respond to students, who maybe have the calling, who understand that they are going to incur some debt and they get the financial aid but then there's the time proposition, there's years of study, what do you say to that?

Dr. Charles Terrell: You've got it spend your time doing something. And if you spend your time doing something that you love, that you care about, that is helping you fulfill a dream, then it really won't matter in the long run that it might take a few years longer to become a physician than it would to become a lawyer or businessman, a college professor or anything else.

Eric Weissman: And generally speaking, you must have conversations with a lot of people who overcame barriers or who looked at them as challenges, and got through it, and then became doctors. When you talk to these people who are probably still young doctors and it wasn't that long ago that they were making the decision to go to medical school generally do they feel like it's worth it in their conversation? What surprises them and what do you take away when you talk to these young doctors?

Dr. Charles Terrell: Oh, I think they absolutely feel that it's worth it. We just conducted a minority faculty seminar in Miami recently, and our key note speaker was [Dr. Christian Arbelaez](#), who we have highlighted on [AspiringDocs.org](#), and he told a story of coming from Columbia to

the United States under really difficult immigrant circumstances and he was told that he really shouldn't pursue a career in medicine because there were too many obstacles. And he overcame them all, he overcame people telling him that he was not going to make it and when you hear him talk today it is with such joyful abandon, that you know he made the right decision. And this tends to be the theme for young physicians that I talk to who'd overcome challenges and pursuing a career in medicine, they are really psyched that they stayed the course.

Eric Weissman: That's great. Let's go back to the challenges again. It's great to look at the end of the tunnel and see the glory at the end, but what about the MCAT? I understand that the MCAT causes all medical students a great deal of anxiety, there's a lot of preparation, there's a lot of concern, how do you advise students who are getting ready to take the MCAT to respond to it, what should they do?

Dr. Charles Terrell: First of all, I advise them to look at it as just another of the many challenges they would face in pursuing a career in medicine or any challenge that you face in trying to develop a career. But the most important thing to realize about the MCAT is that if you do well in your course work then you are on your way to preparing yourself to do well on the MCAT. That doesn't always work out that way I know but that's the most important thing. I don't think the focus should be on the MCAT, I think the focus should be doing well in your course work. And when it comes to actually

preparing for the MCAT I think you've got to talk to your peers, talk to pre-med advisors, and explore the benefits of test preparation. A test preparation tends to help students. It's not necessarily in every case but I think it's important to get as much advice as you possibly can about how to succeed when taking the MCAT.

Eric Weissman: So let's consider a sophomore, an undergraduate sophomore, who is thinking about whether to pursue a career in medicine – is that when people are making that decision in your experience?

Dr. Charles Terrell: We'll love to get them in kindergarten. Really, it spans the pipeline.

Eric Weissman: Right, so let's say 20 years old, a couple years in school, aptitude and interest in medicine, what's important? Should they be worrying about money right off the bat? Should they be worrying about MCAT? What should they be asking themselves?

Dr. Charles Terrell: They should be having as great a time as they can in college. Enjoying the college experience, enjoying their course work, taking courses that interest them, that are going to provide the kind of intellectual growth that they like to see and while there are doing this of course start taking pre-med requirements, and as they take their pre-med requirements they are going to get some reading on how interested they are going to continue to be in doing this kind of work. And they are going to get a reading on how well they can do. Also it's important I think to connect with the pre-med advisor on every college campus. But if there's not a

formal pre-med advisor, then connect with someone on the faculty who has an interest and a background in helping students prepare for a career in medicine. Talk to them. Talk to pre-meds. Talk to other students who are interested in medicine and certainly if you know professionals in the field or if your family knows professionals in the field, talk to them.

Eric Weissman: What about a major? Does your major matter as an undergraduate when you're interested in going to medical school?

Dr. Charles Terrell: I sat on an admissions committee, at one of our medical schools for over 20 years – we always said it doesn't matter what you major in, the important thing is that you do well in the courses that you take, that you fulfill your pre-med requirements and that you do as well as you can.

Eric Weissman: And when someone has completed medical school, and has become a doctor, what is it that you think that they might have wanted to change about their undergraduate experience? Do you ever hear that they wish that they had done something differently? Or now that they know X they would have done Y a little bit differently? It seems like something where everyone gets into it in a little bit of a different way.

Dr. Charles Terrell: Certainly...I consistently over the years have heard from most physicians that, they would have liked to have explored the curriculum more broadly when they had an opportunity to do so. Because quite often, there is a focus on specialization in medicine

and even in college - a specialization in taking courses to prepare for medicine. So I tend to hear, "I wish I had taken art or dance or languages."

Eric Weissman: Hmm-mm, rather than people who might have focused too much on Science.

Dr. Charles Terrell: Absolutely.

Eric: Have you ever met a doctor who wished he or she hadn't become a doctor?

Dr. Charles Terrell: I probably have but what's great for this podcast is that no one comes to mind right now.

Eric Weissman: And what's the most inspiring, if you can think of one or that just comes to mind on a really great reason in your conversation with young doctors of why someone, an individual might want to become a doctor?

Dr. Charles Terrell: I think young people who find a way to make a difference in people's lives, in a way that is as significant as medicine, that is the glow. I think that is what in my experience drives the satisfaction of young people who become physicians. They know that they are doing something incredibly important and particularly for under-represented physicians. They know that they are mentoring. They know that they are doing work that we desperately need to have done. Administering to populations that

are underserved, and that they are making a difference in the healthcare of America.

Eric Weissman: And if you had only one thing to say to students listening to this podcast, what would it be?

Dr. Charles Terrell: I would tell them what my mother told me: Never compromise the dream because the dream always wins.

Eric Weissman: Charles Terrell thank you very much for joining us today.

Dr. Charles Terrell: You're quite welcome, thank you for having me.

Eric Weissman: I'm Eric Weissman, with the AAMC and AspiringDocs.org.