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A Prescription for Desegregation

The American Civil Rights Movement that in many respects defined the 20th century was itself defined by its leaders. Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, and Malcolm X are today household names. While these nationally recognized figures are certainly iconic of the Movement, consider, too, as leaders the African-American physicians of the Civil Rights era. We hold our doctors in high regard and to high standards of moral and just behavior, and it is nothing controversial to consider a physician to be a community leader. With the 20th century issues of segregation both in higher education and in the practice of healthcare in mind, what was the role of African-American physicians as leaders in the Civil Rights Movement of the era? It is easy to imagine that black physicians were bound by the Jim Crow laws in the South and--until federal intervention--were unable to receive a medical education or practice their craft in a desegregated context. However, evidence offered in the form of oral accounts given by African-American physicians working in Texas during the 20th century gives a different perspective. It is revealed that these physicians were at the forefront of their own civil rights effort early after the Second World War. The nature of African-American physician involvement in the Civil Rights Movement and the effect that the Movement had on the lives of these individuals are intertwined. Just as the experiences of African-American physicians in the mid-twentieth century were heavily shaped by the social and political contexts of the era, in turn these physicians helped to shape the social realities in which they worked.

The work of African-American physicians to secure civil rights with respect to their education and practice predates even the famed 1954 Supreme Court Case of *Brown v Board of Education*. However, this is not to say that their path was unobstructed. Dr. Edith Irby Jones was

a renowned Houston internist and pioneer for African-American involvement in medicine, and she provided context for the racial realities of her upbringing in a 2007 interview conducted by historians at the University of Houston. Having grown up in Arkansas during the 1930s and '40s, Jones experienced the effects of a Jim Crow culture. "The schools were segregated. The movie theaters were segregated," she remarked.¹ When asked about the role of African-American physicians in her childhood community, she reported, "there was one black physician...he was, at that time, attempting to see all of the population."² Jones' account of her upbringing reveals the effect of early 20th century racial segregation on the medical profession. That in her Arkansas hometown there was one doctor serving the entirety of the black community shows not only that medical care was a segregated practice, but also that African-American physicians were relatively few in number. Data maintained by the American Association of Medical Colleges reinforces Jones' anecdotal evidence. In a 2010 publication entitled *Diversity in the Physician Workplace*, the AAMC reports that in 1950 (the earliest year for which this data was made available) only 50 of the over 5000 medical school graduates were black.³ The scarcity of African-American physicians in the Jim Crow era is perhaps unsurprising, but only serves to strengthen the argument that black physicians served as leaders in the communities they served. Necessarily educated and entrusted with the health of an entire populace, an African-American doctor during the Jim Crow era could be expected to serve as a figurehead for the social advancement of their race. This argument is perhaps best exemplified by the work of Dr. Edith Irby Jones herself.

¹ Edith Irby Jones, Second Interview. Interview by Kathleen Brosnan and Ramona Hopkins. Transcribed by Suzanne Mascola. *To Bear Fruit For Our Race* (University of Houston, 2009). Web. 13 Apr. 2016.

² Edith Irby Jones, Second Interview.

³ Laura Castillo-Page, "Diversity in the Physician Workforce: Facts and Figures 2010," Association of American Medical Colleges, 2010. Web. 13 Apr. 2016.

The experience of Edith Irby Jones as she entered medical school in 1948 reinforces the conception of a black physician as a leader around whom their community can organize.⁴ Having gone to public school in a segregated context and opting to study at a historically black college during her undergraduate years, it wasn't until her applications to medical school that she challenged Jim Crow culture directly. Among other schools, she applied to the University of Arkansas, a school which had never taken on a black medical student. According to Jones, while there was no official policy of racial non-inclusion at the university, "there was almost an understood thing - this is for white students. The university was for white students."⁵ If her application, submitted six years before the *Brown v. Board* decision of 1954, was noteworthy for pushing long-maintained racial boundaries, it comes as no surprise that her acceptance made headlines. *Life Magazine* reported on the event, noting that Jones was "the only Negro in...any white medical school in the whole South," adding that Jones "was admitted...on her academic standing alone."⁶ George Maxwell, president of the NAACP, sent a letter to the admissions board giving the University of Arkansas "great credit in breaking down the racial barriers in the United States."⁷ As evidenced by the attention given by both the popular press and civil rights activists, Edith Irby Jones made significant contributions not only to the future of black physicians, but to the civil rights movement as a whole. In eliminating the barriers of racial segregation in medical education, Jones served as an icon for the growing movement to desegregate all public schools. In fact—in an expression of solidarity and pride—the black

⁴ Edith Irby Jones interview with Leigh Culter, Lauren Kerr, and Yimei Zhang. Transcribed by Leigh Culter. *To Bear Fruit For Our Race* (University of Houston, 2009). Web. 13 Apr. 2016.

⁵ Edith Irby Jones, Second Interview.

⁶ "Edith Irby Goes to School." *Life* 29 Jan. 1949: 33. *University of Houston Center for Public History*. Web. 13 Apr. 2016.

⁷ George Maxwell, letter to Dr. H. Clay Chenault, 20 Dec. 1948. *To Bear Fruit For Our Race* (University of Houston, 2009). Web. 13 Apr. 2016.

community of her Arkansas hometown gathered together the necessary \$500 for her tuition, a price she could not have otherwise paid.⁸ The support of her community contextualizes her acceptance as a fully-fledged civil rights effort rather than an isolated occurrence. That she had such community backing in her successful passage through a previously all-white medical school—she graduated in 1952—reaffirms the image of the African-American physician as a civil rights leader.

As the 20th century progressed, so did the Civil Rights Movement—with African-American physicians at the fore. The relationship between black physicians and the civil rights effort was reciprocal: the contribution of African-American doctors advanced the Movement, and the advancement of the Movement granted these physicians new opportunities in both medical practice and in everyday life. Concisely phrased by Houston surgeon Dr. Edison Banfield, “The 1960s were those years that they had these sit-ins at lunch counters and things like that, and I participated in them. So, things opened up for us.”⁹ A notable example of African-American physicians working towards the procurement of civil rights can be found in the activities of the Houston Medical Forum, an organization of black doctors, during the Civil Rights Era. Dr. Robert Bacon, former president of the organization, reported in an interview with the University of Houston Center for Public History:

Oh, we were very active during the civil rights movement. There was a group of youngsters...known as Progressive Youth...and what they did, every Saturday for about six weeks, they would go down to Union Station and would sit in on the lunch counter...We would all go down to the police station to bail the kids out.¹⁰

⁸ Edith Irby Jones, Second Interview.

⁹ Edison Banfield interview with Ramona Hopkins. Transcribed by Suzzane Mascola. *To Bear Fruit For Our Race* (University of Houston, 2009). Web. 9 Mar. 2016.

¹⁰ Robert Bacon interview with Kathleen A. Brosnan. Transcribed by Suzzane Mascola. *To Bear Fruit For Our Race* (University of Houston, 2009). Web. 13 Apr. 2016.

The Houston Medical Forum directly participated in the protests that defined the Civil Rights Era, supporting even those who were jailed for participation. That a medical organization such as the forum demonstrated such commitment to the goals and values of the Civil Rights Movement again confirms the tenacity with which African-American physicians fought for equality. Just as in the case of Dr. Edith Irby Jones in the decade prior, this commitment was rewarded. Where once many hospitals refused to hire black physicians, the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 brought sweeping change. According to Dr. Banfield, “[W]ithin a few months or years, all the staffs opened up...Dr. Gathe and I, we did the first operation by a black doctor at Methodist Hospital. So, things moved right along very rapidly.”¹¹ Just as African-American doctors impacted the push for civil rights, the passage of civil rights legislation had a profound impact on the careers of African-American doctors. Black physicians provided a driving force towards the advancement of their own civil rights.

Racism did not end with the passage of the Civil Rights Act, and African-American physicians faced unique challenges even following the widely recognized end of the Civil Rights Movement with the act’s passage. Speaking with the University of Houston Center for Public History about his experiences following widespread desegregation of universities, African-American dermatologist Dr. Seymour Weaver remarked, “I started Baylor in 1974. Baylor had their first African-American black medical student in 1969...there were some professors that had been there for 20, 25 years that weren't used to many black students in their classes...so, it was a transition.”¹² Similarly, psychiatrist Dr. Rahn Baily gave the cryptic remark “there certainly were some experiences that I was aware of and some that happened to me that I thought could have

¹¹ Edison Banfield interview with Ramona Hopkins.

¹² Dr. S. Weaver interview with Tim O’Brien. Transcribed by Suzzane Mascola. *To Bear Fruit For Our Race* (University of Houston, 2009. Web. 13 Apr. 2016).

been based on bias and discrimination.”¹³ Following the legal and cultural shift in the wake of the Civil Rights Act, it appears that overt racism became less than common in the medical profession, replaced by a sense of unspoken prejudice.

Driven by social forces different than those who had worked prior to and during the Civil Rights Movement, African-American physicians too responded in a different way. The Houston Medical Forum, once involved in civil rights protests, after 1964 served as a networking organization. Speaking to an interviewer about the forum, cardiologist Dr. Oliver C. Hunter Jr explained, “it had two purposes to serve: one was a social outlet and two, it gave you an opportunity to fellowship and intermingle with the doctors that were already in practice that had similar problems that you had.”¹⁴ By networking with other African-American medical professionals, physicians such as Dr. Hunter were able to circumvent prejudicial bias in aspects of the career such as hiring and financing. Communities and support structures such as the Houston Medical Forum provided black physicians with greater control over their working conditions and dissolved barriers to career advancement. The adaptation of the forum to the needs of its members is another historical instance of African-American physicians taking charge of their environment in response to the social and political conditions of the time. The Houston Medical Forum is still active today as a voice for black doctors.

The Civil Rights Movement can be difficult to understand in a causal sense due to the host of factors that contributed to its growth, spread, and resolution. What can be said of the Movement is that African-American physicians both played a key role in advancing the cause of

¹³ Dr. Rahn Bailey interview by Tim O'Brien. Transcribed by Suzzane Mascola. *To Bear Fruit For Our Race* (University of Houston, 2009). Web. 13 Apr. 2016.

¹⁴ Oliver C. Hunter interview with Vicki Meyers. Transcribed by Suzzane Mascola. *To Bear Fruit For Our Race* (University of Houston, 2009). Web. 13 Apr. 2016.

civil rights and in turn were profoundly affected by the cultural and political outcomes. Over the span of the 20th century, black physicians transitioned from a segregated world—in which schooling options were sparse and practice was limited to one's own race—to a world of legal equality in education and career options. In this span, many doctors served as leaders in the Civil Rights Movement. Dr. Edith Irby Jones, for example, made headlines and inspired those around her with admittance to an all-white medical school. Later, the Houston Medical Forum supported and involved itself with sit-in protests. In no small way, we see the capability for physicians to act as community leaders and make changes in both the lives of those around them and in the nature of their own profession. While there is still work to be done towards the cause of racial equality in medicine as evidenced by the comments of Dr. Rahn Baily and others, we may celebrate the successes of those doctors who helped bring the field to where it is today. We may too trust that our physicians will continue to make strides in healing not only people, but likewise the social fabric in which we live and work.