

TOURO COLLEGE OF OSTEOPATHIC MEDICINE HOSTS CONFERENCE ON HEALTH DISPARITIES

Nearly 200 community leaders, health care professionals, medical students, and faculty from the Touro College of Osteopathic Medicine (TouroCOM) in Harlem attended a conference on health-related disparities at the College on October 26th, where they heard from experts in mental health, HIV, pain management and obstetrics. The audience also heard from two high-profile speakers who urged education and prevention as stepping stones to combating disparities in the health care arena.

“‘Healthy’ is something we need to [connect with] in our community,” said the Reverend Al Sharpton, a keynote speaker. “It’s not a black thing – it’s a ‘got too much sugar in our diet’ thing.” Rev. Sharpton acknowledged the importance of ‘putting a spotlight’ on health care disparity and discrimination in any form in New York City and the nation, but also called on the community to change eating habits and visit their doctors.

“Yes, deal more with diversity,” he said, but work on “changing the consciousness of those who need it the most. Then they will demand the services they need.”

Dr. Hazel Dukes, president of the NAACP New York State, acknowledged that good health care should be for all, but urged preventative measures, such as educating children in math and science and ensuring youth are receiving good nutrition and avoiding substance abuse.

“Let’s get real about health disparities. When you hit 65, you have hypertension, and obesity. You can talk about disparities but it’s too late. It starts with milk and cereal and a prepared breakfast at home,” Dr. Dukes said. “We have to look in our community for what we shop, buy and eat. This is where we begin to address health care disparities.”

The conference was sponsored by Diversonomix, a nationally syndicated strategic diversity management consultancy focused on advancing inclusion, improving equity and remedying disparity within the nation’s health care system.

TouroCOM, which recently graduated its first class, opened in 2007 as the first osteopathic medical school with an emphasis on training minority doctors. Its mission is to improve medical care in Harlem and to increase the number of minorities practicing medicine. Unfortunately, most clinical training does not take place in Harlem, but in other underserved areas, said Dr. Robert Goldberg, dean of TouroCOM.

In his remarks, Dean Goldberg lamented the underrepresentation of minorities in medical schools and emphasized the school’s commitment to address health care disparities. He said that 100 years ago, African-Americans accounted for only 3.3 percent of the medical school population in the United States, a number that today has increased to only 3.7 percent. The school receives more than 4,000 applications for 125 seats – but few from central Harlem, he noted. Of the recent graduating class, 53 percent chose residencies in primary care fields, which include general/internal medicine, pediatrics, family practice, and OB/GYN. This contrasts sharply with the national rate of doctors choosing primary care, which is five percent.

TouroCOM places a high value on community-based, primary care medicine, and it is hoped, Dr. Goldberg said, that graduates will serve Harlem and similar urban neighborhoods following their residencies. “We screen for applicants who are underrepresented minorities and for those committed to serving the community,” the dean said.

Milton O.C. Haynes, M.D., an adjunct clinical associate professor of obstetrics and gynecology at TouroCOM directly addressed medical disparities. Dr. Haynes said that one in two Americans will be a member of a racial or ethnic minority by 2050, according to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, and that currently African-Americans, Hispanic Americans and American Indians make up 15 percent of the population.

However these latter three groups, Dr. Haynes said, account for six percent of physicians, five percent of dentists and

nine percent of nurses, according to the Association of American Medical Colleges.

Dr. Haynes then cited statistics showing disparities among the populations to be served. A stark example he provided is the infant mortality rate of 13.5 percent out of 10,000 births in the African-American population, compared with 5.7 percent among Caucasians.

“Black women are twice as likely as white women to get late or no prenatal care, and Hispanic women are three times as likely to get late or no prenatal care,” Dr. Haynes said.

Other speakers included Brenda Blackmon, Emmy-award winning journalist and news anchor at Channel 9; Jeffrey Gardere, Ph.D., adjunct clinical assistant professor at TouroCOM and chief consulting psychologist for FOX 5 television in New York; Zebulon Taintor, M.D., adjunct professor of psychiatry at New York University; and Esquire Anthony, DO, consultant for Diversonomix for pain management disparities.



Pictured at a recent conference on health care disparities hosted by Touro College of Osteopathic Medicine (TouroCOM) in Harlem are (L-R) Dean Robert Goldberg, DO; Director of Community Affairs Rev. Alphonso Cohen; and the Rev. Al Sharpton, founder and president of the National Action Network (NAN) Photo by Gideon Manasseh.