

Implicit Bias, Microaggression and Maternal Health Disparities

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The University of Washington, School of Medicine, acknowledges and honors that the University stands on the unceded land of the Coast Salish peoples, land which touches the shared waters of all tribes and bands within the Duwamish, Puyallup, Suquamish, Tulalip and Muckleshoot nations. Without them we would not have this healing, working, teaching and learning environment. I humbly take the opportunity to thank the original caretakers of this land past and present.

Overview

- Maternal health disparities
- Implicit bias, microaggressions
- Discrimination in pregnancy care
- Next: Strategies to address bias

Maternal Mortality (2020)

Country Comparisons —

Maternal mortality ratio

The Maternal mortality rate (MMR) is the annual number of female deaths per 100,000 live births from any cause related to or aggravated by pregnancy or its management (excluding accidental or incidental causes).

CIA World Fact Book: <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/field/maternal-mortality-ratio/country-comparison/>

Global Disparities in Maternal Mortality

- United States: 2020 data (CIA 1.)
 - 64th among 186 nations
 - US=21 deaths/100,000 live births

Least

- Belarus= 1 death/100,000
- Norway= 2 deaths/100,000

Most

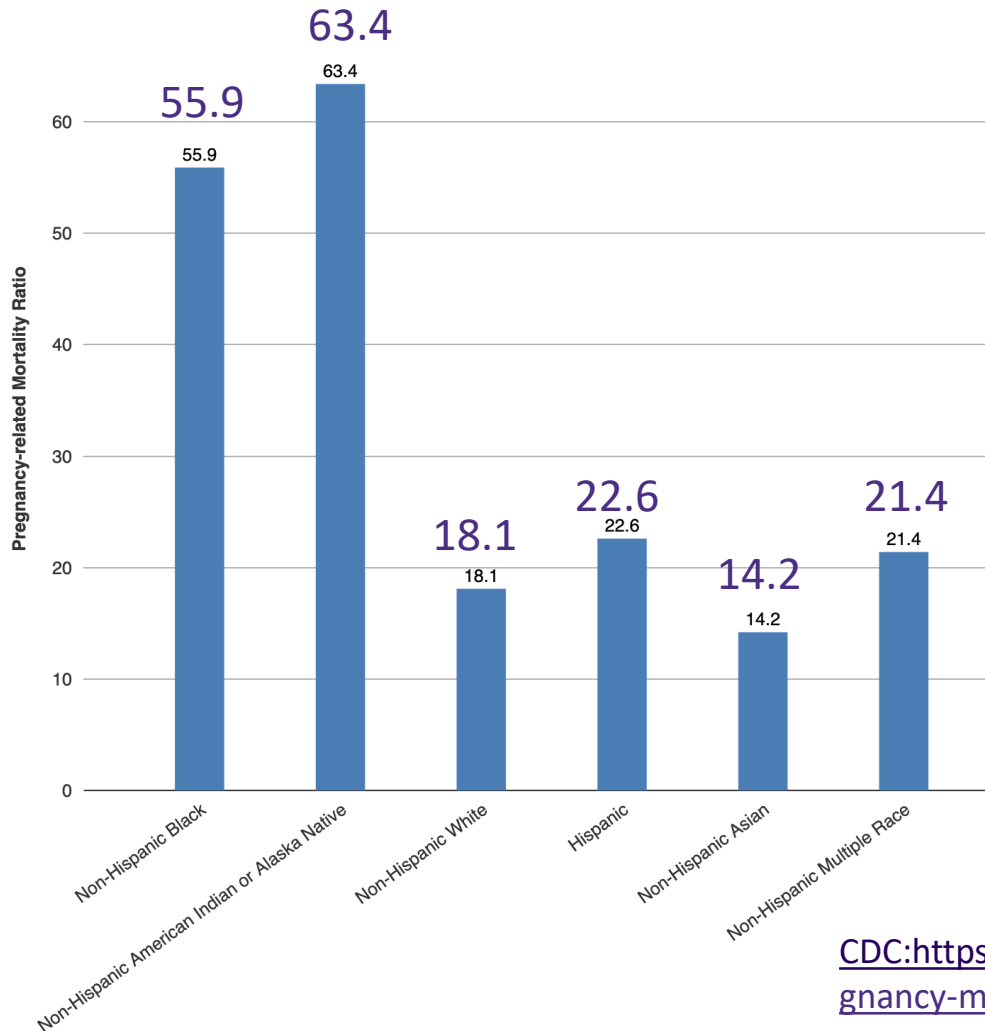
- South Sudan= 1,223 deaths/100,000
- Everyday, worldwide, 800 women die from pregnancy related causes, one every 2 minutes (World Health Organization 2.)

1. CIA World Fact Book: <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/field/maternal-mortality-ratio/country-comparison/>
2. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240068759>

Figure 2. Pregnancy-related mortality ratio by race-ethnicity:
2017–2019 and 2020^{a,b}

Make a selection from the filters to change the visualization information.

2020



CDC:<https://www.cdc.gov/maternalmortality/php/pregnancy-mortalitysurveillance/index.html>

Maternal Health: US Public Health Crisis

- In 2019 there were 1,210 pregnancy-related deaths in US, a steady increase from 505 in 1999
- Structural racism, lack of access, racism, discrimination, implicit racial bias (review article: Montalmont & Ettinger, 2023)
- Majority of these deaths are preventable: CDC

Early Medical Experimentation

In the antebellum South, physicians and hospitals disproportionately use Black bodies and living Black individuals for medical experimentation and education. Physicians find it easier to obtain the bodies of Black Americans for dissection and for testing new surgical procedures. Harriet Martineau notes after an 1834 visit that:



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THE HISTORY OF RACISM IN MEDICINE

1830s - 1840s: Shades of Difference

Krieger, N. 1987

- Medical field professionalizing, industrial expansion, need to further justify and maintain slavery
- Medicine embraced the idea of developing scientific biological proof of Black inferiority, vigorous experimentation
- Many of the myths and false beliefs of the era continue to be believed today by clinicians and may impact care (i.e. undertreatment of pain)

Microaggressions, Pregnancy and Childbirth

- “Brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral...slights and insults to a target person or group.”
 - being ignored, opinions minimized, followed in public (Derald Wing Sue, 2010, Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation)
- One study: Racial microaggressions may delay African American women’s use of prenatal care (Slaughter-Acey, 2019)

Mistreatment in Pregnancy and Childbirth (US)

- Overall, 17.3% of pregnant women reported mistreatment
 - Loss of autonomy
 - Being shouted at, scolded, threatened
 - Ignored
 - No response to requests for help during maternity care
- 27.2% women of color/low SES vs. 18.7% white women/low SES
- Lower likelihood of mistreatment: vaginal birth, midwife, white, age > 30

(Vedam et al., *Reproductive Health*, 16:77, 2019)

Implicit Bias

Implicit bias: “attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, decision-making, and behavior, without our even realizing it” (Kang, 2021)

How our Minds Work

- First impressions are made quickly (snap judgments)
- In-group favoritism or “people like me”
- Automatic associations
 - implicit/explicit associations
 - absorb messages from our culture

Implicit Bias is Contagious



- Just observing a biased person express subtle negative bias toward a Black person can shift observer's racial bias
- Others' biases may "creep into our minds and infect our behaviors"
- Positive behavior is also contagious

Photo: Deposit Photo, 2021

Willard, Isaac, Carney, 2015

How Might Implicit Bias Impact Pregnancy and Childbirth Care?

Real-world clinic visits

For Black patients, Clinicians' implicit pro-White bias:

- Patients' less liking of the clinician
- Less confidence in clinician
- Less perceived respect from clinician
- More clinician verbal dominance
- Less patient-centered communication (Cooper et al., 2012)

Strategies to Address Bias and Discrimination

Good intentions are not enough

- Personal awareness
- Collect data, monitor equity
- Reduce discretion- develop objective processes
- Promote inclusion and diversity
- Community led initiatives
- Accountability (individual, institutional)



Thank you!
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