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# International Journal of Women's Dermatology

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## Editorial

### Turning the Tide: How the Women's Dermatologic Society Leads in Diversifying Dermatology



After the police killings of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, many experienced an awakening to the racial injustice and bias that negatively affect the lives of underrepresented minorities in the United States today. National medical institutions and the healthcare industry at large pledged to improve in areas of racial inequality. Those in medicine also took charge in addressing COVID-19 racial health disparities, recognizing higher infectivity and death rates among African Americans (Abedi et al., 2020). As many in these institutions began their journey to racial equity in 2020, the Women's Dermatologic Society (WDS) impressively had already made strides to recognize and address this need years prior, setting an example for other medical societies to emulate.

Dermatology has been described as the second least racially diverse specialty in medicine (Pandya et al., 2016). However, the WDS has been a trailblazer in efforts to increase racial diversity in dermatology. The WDS recognized the importance of representation in leadership early. Compared with its counterpart organizations, the WDS is the only organization to have four women of color serve in the presidency: Lenore Kakita, MD, Wendy Roberts, MD, Valerie Callender, MD, and Pearl Grimes, MD. Each of these physicians has contributed to WDS's promotion of racial diversity and instituted other important programs during their respective presidencies.

In 2002, Dr. Lenore Kakita became the first Japanese American to serve as WDS president. She championed inclusivity by extending membership to dermatologists in both private practice and academic sectors. The result was an increase in racial diversity in the WDS. In addition, Dr. Kakita helped raise funding for the WDS by forming partnerships with pharmaceutical companies and used the funds toward community outreach programs. Dr. Kakita also encouraged Dr. Wendy Roberts to become president.

Much in tune with the United States' election of the first black president, Barack Obama, the WDS elected their first black president, Dr. Wendy Roberts, in 2009. Dr. Roberts' position as president drew the attention of dermatologists in diverse skin of color groups and led to a greater increase in their membership at the WDS. Furthermore, her Play Safe in the Sun initiative campaigned across 30 U.S. cities, encouraging communities to wear sunscreen and educating them on skin health. Dr. Roberts also led the WDS to publish its first keepsake book, *Petals & Pearls*, a collection of inspirational stories by past leaders and members of the WDS.

With each successive president, there has been progress in diversity. Under the leadership of Dr. Valerie Callender, the second black president elected in 2014, the WDS increased the racial

diversity of its board members. During this time, the WDS established the *International Journal of Women's Dermatology* (IJWD). Dr. Callender also promoted the WDS's outreach into communities of color by bringing awareness regarding skin cancer to the Congressional Black Caucus, which is a caucus of black members of the U.S. Congress who use their authority and resources to fight for equality among people of color.

Dr. Pearl Grimes became the third black president of the WDS in 2018, and she continued to strengthen the IJWD. She directed the WDS to remove publication fees from the IJWD to encourage a larger, diverse group of researchers to publish in the journal. Dr. Grimes also established the Women's Shelter Initiative to address the skin care, hygiene, nutrition, self-care, and social needs of women residing in shelters across the United States. The WDS has worked with 17 shelters in the United States, empowering each woman they encounter. The society's work in diversity does not stop at the borders of the United States. Alongside Dr. Rashmi Sarkar, Dr. Grimes and the WDS also made international impact by working with women in shelters in New Delhi, India. In addition, the WDS has worked with dermatologists to create networking events in India, Australia, Brazil, and South Africa.

In the commentary "Diversity and inclusivity are essential to the future of dermatology," Drs. Jenna Lester and Kanade Shinkai encourage those in the specialty to ensure diversity in research and publications (Lester and Shinkai, 2019). The WDS has been working toward this call to action by increasing the number of publications related to skin of color in the IJWD. Throughout the past 3 years, there have been 26 publications in the journal specific to skin and hair of color, as well as diversity and inclusion issues. A diverse array of topics, including vitiligo, alopecia in black patients, and skin lightening among people of color, as well as a call for increasing diversity in the field of dermatology, can all be found in the journal.

In addition to inclusivity in leadership and publications, the WDS works to be inclusive through mentorship. Within the 2018 Diversity Task Initiative, Drs. Mona Gohara and Alison Ehrlich established a summer research fellowship program for first- and second-year medical students in underrepresented minority groups. The fellowship pairs students with a WDS mentor who guides them through a research plan over a 6- to 12-week time period. Over the past two summers, 12 medical students have received summer research awards. Moreover, the Diversity and Inclusion Committee has hosted four large networking events, attended by 150 medical students belonging to underrepresented

minority groups. Each event has served as an avenue to teach students about the necessary components for a strong dermatological residency application. Students have not only gained new insight through the networking events but have been able to form connections with many dermatologists within the society. The WDS has made great strides in helping diversify the field of dermatology and will continue pursuing this goal through leadership, community engagement, and mentorship.

#### Conflicts of interest

None.

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None.

#### Study approval

N/A.

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