

COVID-19: Acknowledging and Addressing Racism and Xenophobia

As the COVID-19 crisis continues to sweep the nation, an additional concern has come to the forefront of conversations in hospitals and health systems: addressing racism and xenophobia. While organizations seek to address the virus itself, individuals from underrepresented and diverse backgrounds face this additional challenge.

Xenophobia, or the fear and hatred of people from other countries, has accentuated anti-Asian sentiment, including reported hate crimes. Data indicate that verbal and physical attacks against Asians have risen and may continue to escalate. Reports include patients refusing care and verbally harassing Asian providers. This prejudice puts communities at risk, as some Asians and Asian Americans may not seek care due to fear of discrimination both in public spaces and within the health care system. With these experiences comes an emotional and physical toll—increased anxiety and depression, concern for personal safety and a decline in physical health. Lived experiences of discrimination also may contribute to chronic stress, accelerated aging and mistrust in the health care system.

On April 16, the American Hospital Association, alongside the American Medical Association and the American Nurses Association, addressed these inequities in a letter to the Department of Health & Human Services. Similarly, the AHA's Institute for Diversity and Health Equity recently released a blog, "5 Actions to Promote Health Equity during the COVID-19 Pandemic."

Here are some action steps hospital and health systems are taking to address xenophobia and racism within their organizations.

1. Acknowledge the Issue: Many hospital and health care leaders actively acknowledge the health disparities between the majority and marginalized populations. Experts from across the field are working with government, state and community leaders to acknowledge and address these issues. In places like Michigan, where 40% of COVID-19 deaths are from black communities, leaders from Henry Ford Health System joined the Michigan Task Force on Racial Disparities.

2. Make it Clear: In Boston, leaders at Massachusetts General Hospital took immediate action when an anesthesia resident was followed and verbally harassed. Shortly after the incident, hospital leaders connected with the resident and released an internal communication on reporting harassment and additional support methods. The quick and thoughtful response by team members made it clear: There is no tolerance for biases or prejudice of any kind.



3. Be Visible: Racial discrimination is a social determinant of health, and evidence suggests that [people exposed to racism and xenophobia](#) experience insufficient access to care and are more likely to have negative patient experiences. That is why the visibility of policies, procedures and cultural competencies is growing increasingly more important. BJC HealthCare’s website home page offers a quick link to its [statement on nondiscrimination](#). Taking time to redistribute both external and internal resources, like employee resource groups, also may strengthen visibility.

4. Directly Focus: Encourage your team to explore the perspectives and lived experiences of others through webinars, blogs or quick podcasts like this one with [Kimberlydawn Wisdom, M.D.](#) An insightful leader, Wisdom shares her thoughts on Black History and Women’s History Month and offers helpful perspectives for many. Massachusetts General Hospital, convened a [panel](#) that addressed “Confronting Xenophobia & Supporting our Asian Community During COVID19” to respond to and shed light on issues faced by Asians. These stories and others help build a culture of inclusion that fosters education and greater understanding.

We must work together to address the issue at hand and support our communities.

Other Sources:

- [“Biases you didn’t know existed in the healthcare Industry and how they impact patients and medical professionals”](#)
- [“Covid-19 has inflamed racism against Asian-Americans. Here’s how to fight back”](#)
- [“FBI warns of potential surge in hate crimes against Asian Americans amid coronavirus”](#)
- [“Asian Americans report over 650 racist acts over last week, new data says”](#)
- [“Boston doctor becomes victim of COVID-19 racism. How should we respond?”](#)
- [“BJC Statement on Non-Discrimination”](#)
- [“Irony: Hate crimes surge against Asian-Americans while they are on the front lines fighting COVID-19”](#)
- [“The Black Plague”](#)
- [“The impact of racism on the future health of adults: protocol for a prospective cohort study”](#)
- [“Early life racial discrimination linked to depression, accelerated aging”](#)

