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Fighting Medical Racism with Education and Action

An Interview with Denise Tyson, President, Maryland Acupuncture Society (US)

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Abstract

Denise Tyson is the president of the Maryland Acupuncture Society (US), one of the state-level professional organizations that comprises the American Society of Acupuncturists. Following the police murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, she called on her colleagues in the acupuncture profession to take meaningful action against racism and to educate themselves about the long history of racist violence against African Americans. In July 2020 an editor of *Asian Medicine* interviewed Tyson to learn about her medical career and her perspectives on race and health care. The main themes of the interview include: her affinity for acupuncture and Chinese medicine, her experiences with racial bias in both biomedicine and integrative medicine, strategies for making acupuncture organizations more inclusive, and the crucial role that education plays in combating racism.

Keywords

Maryland Acupuncture Society – cultural competence – medical racism – social justice – Black Lives Matter

Denise Tyson, a native of Washington, DC, is a licensed acupuncturist and the co-owner of Advanced Integrative Health Group in Gambrills, Maryland. She holds a Bachelor of Science degree from American University and a Master of Business Administration degree from Howard University, as well as a Master of Acupuncture degree, a Master of Oriental Medicine degree, and a Doctor of Oriental Medicine degree from the Maryland University of Integrative Health (MUIH). She also holds certifications from the International Association of Reiki Professionals and the National Acupuncture Detoxification Association. She is a board member of the Institutional Review Board of the MedStar Research Institute in Hyattsville, Maryland, and an adjunct faculty at MUIH. She is the current president of the Maryland Acupuncture Society (MAS), one of the state-based professional organizations that collectively constitute the American Society of Acupuncturists (ASA).¹

The police murder of George Floyd, an unarmed African American man, on May 25, 2020, ignited global protests in sympathy with the Black Lives Matter movement, calling for an end to systemic racism and police violence. At the time, many US organizations of integrative medicine also made statements to affirm their support for racial equity and social justice.² This included the ASA and the National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (NCCAOM),³ who issued a brief joint statement of which Tyson was initially critical. In her own lengthy statement emailed to MAS members in June 2020, Tyson specifically decried the killing of Floyd and cited examples to show that his murder was part of a long history of racist violence against African Americans, rooted in slavery and perpetuated through state and social policies. She called on acupuncturists to educate themselves about this history as one of many actions that they could take to help fight racism.

Yi-Li Wu of *Asian Medicine* spoke over Zoom with Tyson on July 17, 2020, about her family's background, her career and experiences in the health care field, and the need to look unflinchingly at the history of racism in order to combat it. This interview has been condensed from the original conversation and edited for style and clarity. Tyson's statement to MAS is appended.

1 The ASA evolved out of an older professional organization, the American Association of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine, as a collaboration among state-level organizations. See Miller 2015.

2 Weeks 2020a, 2020b.

3 In the US, acupuncture licensing and certification requirements are determined by each state individually. Almost all states, however, use the professional certification programs for licensure developed by the NCCAOM. National Certification Commission on Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine 2021.

Wu: You started with a biology BS, and then you did an MBA, and then you did three degrees in Asian medicine! How did that come about? What was your journey?

Tyson: I started off in biology, premed, and early on was interested in medicine.⁴ My mother is from the Caribbean, and so I am first-generation born in America on that side. My father is from the United States, from Cleveland, Ohio. I kind of grew up in two worlds. Even though my parents are both considered Black people, they had totally different backgrounds, because my mother was an immigrant. So, her experience in America was quite different from my father.

My mother, coming to the US from the Caribbean, was very much into using nature for medicine, making bush tea and all kind of home remedies. Anything that came about, a cold, a cut, anything, my mother is pulling out of the garden. I grew up that way, and I always had an interest in that, and in our family, we have a lineage of midwives. I knew that [medicine] was what I wanted to do, but the question was how I wanted to do it. Coming up, my father was a PhD scientist, and very much into science. And he felt that is what I needed to study.

Wu: Which branch of science is he in?

Tyson: He was a physical chemist. Growing up in Cleveland, he came from a neighborhood where he said most of his friends ended up dead or in prison. He was very bright, but he was always making trouble at school. As a teenager, he got into trouble, and his teacher sent him to the principal's office. He didn't want to go, so he ducked into a classroom. They happened to be doing the college entrance exam, and he passed it, top in the whole state, at age fifteen. He ended up getting a full scholarship to Howard University, and that is where he studied chemistry.⁵ He was recruited by the Department of Defense early on, and DoD paid for the rest of his education – he worked for the Department of the Navy – and then he went to Yale for his master's in chemistry. There,

4 US medical schools require applicants to have a university degree, with training in a related scientific field. This preparatory curriculum is colloquially referred to as “premed.”

5 Howard University is a research university located in Washington, DC. It is one of the historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) established in the latter half of the nineteenth century to provide higher education to Black students during a time when most American colleges and universities either refused to admit them or severely limited their enrollment. Howard's notable alumni include United States Vice President Kamala Harris and Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison.

he had a mentor, a Jewish professor, who was seeing him through because there weren't any Black chemistry students at that time at the graduate level. He was supposed to complete his PhD there. But his mentor died, and the current dean of the school said that they would not let any "N-word" people get a PhD at Yale University.⁶ So, he had to leave.

Wu: What year was this?

Tyson: This was nineteen-fifty ... nine, maybe. My parents had met already. My mother's uncle was a dentist. He went to the dental school at Meharry Medical College [in Nashville, Tennessee], but he ended up working in the Yale area. He used to mentor the Black students. That's how he met my father, and that's how my mother met him, through her uncle. My father was the one who encouraged my mother to come down to [Washington,] DC to go to Howard University because he was going back to do his PhD. And that's how I arrived!

I think that it was devastating to him, as he, a brilliant scientist, really was not able to reach his highest heights because of his color. And that had a big influence on me as well. He served under the federal government until he retired, and he's passed away now, but he had patents under the federal government. He created a propeller system for the submarines for the US Navy during his government career, but few [of his patents] are declassified for review. Later in my father's career in the 1970s, he taught chemistry at the University of Cape Coast in Ghana and developed an interest in and patent for technology related to capillary nuclear reactors.⁷

Wu: What's his name?

Tyson: Dr. Donald Cotton. My mother's story was a little different because she came in from the Caribbean into New York. She was able to get an education first in business in New York then in early childhood education at Howard University. But she found that when she moved to Washington, DC, the story was quite different, and she encountered racism. When she finished school, she went for a job and they told her she couldn't apply because Colored applicants couldn't apply that day. My mother thought, "What is going on here, [with] this America?" My grandfather, her father, actually had lived in the United States during the late '20s, and then to the Depression, when he left to go back to his island of Nevis, which happens to be the birthplace of Alexander

⁶ "N-word" is a euphemism for a racist term used to denigrate Black people.

⁷ Cotton 1982.

Hamilton.⁸ He went to Howard University Law School, and he finished and just couldn't practice. He couldn't get a job. He had to wash dishes with a law degree because he was a Black man. All of these stories in my family impact me heavily. I wanted to do my best and show that I can achieve despite what's going on. And what I found was that in doing that, I incurred a lot of obstacles, a lot of pain, a lot of disappointment, because a lot of times it just had to do with the way I looked.

So, on getting into acupuncture – my mother went with me when I went to work in Minnesota for a brief period of time, and she had plantar fasciitis. She went to the health center, and they asked her: “Would you like to use the Western medicine, or would you like to use the Asian medicine, or Native American medicine?” They actually practiced all of it, in their health system.

Wu: In Minneapolis?

Tyson: Yes, Minneapolis. They, for a long time, have embraced all types of medicines in their healthcare system, which I found very interesting. She chose the acupuncture because they told her that would work very well. And she loved it, because it was gone, her pain and everything. That was my first witness of it. In the Caribbean islands, there's also a large Chinese population because of the indentured servitude that happened after the slaves were emancipated. They brought over Chinese and people from India. Growing up that way, I was already familiar with the culture. For me it was natural just to [think] “whatever works,” and I love all different type of medicines.

I was premed, but I changed my mind because I knew I didn't want to practice medicine that way – Western medicine – but I didn't know which other way. And so I said, “I need to know more about the healthcare systems, how they work, where I could fit in.” That's when I decided to complete the MBA in health administration. That was an education and a journey. I learned a great deal about how health care runs in this country, and the biases, and all of that. Working [in that field] for nearly thirty years, I had enough. I was burnt out. I experienced a lot of racism during my job. I was usually the only Black senior person or executive in my department and being the only one is not pleasant. It's a big burden all the time. A lot of times being passed over for promotions, being passed over in a meeting, no one listening to what you have to say. If someone who is white is saying the same thing that I say, then of course that has more importance.

⁸ Alexander Hamilton (1755 or 1757–1804) was one of the Founding Fathers of the US and served as its first secretary of the treasury.

It's really challenging working in that environment. I needed to stop because I was getting burnt out, and I was feeling emotionally drained. So I said, "I have to do something where I'm working with people, I'm giving back, I feel like I'm healing others, I'm healing myself." I started looking around. "Oh, maybe I'll go be a PA [physician's assistant]. Maybe I'll be a nurse practitioner."⁹ One of my friends said, "There's this school over in Laurel, Maryland, and they have integrative health topics. You might like that." I went to a graduate night, and they said, "What lecture do you want to listen to?" I said, "Acupuncture." I went in there, and I sat, and that was it for me. I was like, "This is it. This is everything that I envision." The philosophy, the science, the brilliance – it was just for me. It translated into everything that I embody, and that I ever thought I would be doing. And I knew this is what I would do till I leave this earth. That's really how I came to study it.

Wu: You had these very marginalizing experiences in the healthcare industry, and then you went into acupuncture. To what extent did you find some of the same experiences recurring within the alternative medicine field? Or was it a very different social dynamic?

Tyson: In studying acupuncture, I went into it highly optimistic. Because for me, it's a medicine that deals with everything from your emotions to the physical, and I think that as a practitioner, you certainly have to have some connection with your patient. You must have some empathy; you have to really connect on all kinds of levels with your patient. So, I was thinking that every acupuncturist I met was going to be that way personally! And I found that it wasn't the case. The professor, or the instructors that I worked with mostly, they had a great deal of bias. I experienced acts of racism while I was in school. And I don't know that they really even knew they were doing it.

Now that everything has come to the surface, the school itself [MUIH] has been dealing with it, and I serve on the diversity committee at the school.¹⁰ I think it's a matter of education, that they just didn't know. And [we're] also dealing with Chinese medicine, and their view of Chinese, because I found

9 In the US, physician assistants and nurse practitioners are healthcare providers who do not have an MD (Doctor of Medicine) degree but are trained and licensed to provide much of the same primary care services that physicians do.

10 In June 2020, Marc Levin, the president of the MUIH, issued a lengthy "Statement of Solidarity with the Black Lives Matter Movement." He vowed that the school would "do more than express outrage" and described a program of action that included the incorporation of "anti-racism education" and "intercultural competency" into the curriculum. Levin 2020.

that odd as well. The school is mostly European Americans; the school, at first, had operated in England.¹¹ There was a bias that I felt was there, and I was definitely opposed to it. My experience culturally was very different. I was exposed to a lot of cultures early, traveled a lot with my parents. [At MUIH] a lot of things they were saying to me were Eurocentric, and I told them so. It's almost as if nothing ever exists unless Europeans found it, which we know is not true. But in this country, that's how history is taught. And all the other cultural histories are left out, or they're put into a point of view that's Eurocentric. It's colonialism – that's what it's based on. I think that's what brought around that environment in the school.

You know, I've even had people say to me: "What? You can't be an acupuncturist, you're a Black person, you're not supposed to ..." And I'm like, "I can study it. Just like you study Western medicine. It's medicine, right? So, I can travel to China. I can go and study under someone, just like anyone else. I like what the medicine offers, and I wish to study it." A lot of different cultures might study acupuncture. But being a Black student oftentimes puts us apart, so much so that when we graduate, you still don't belong.

Wu: How did you make the decision to go into practice for yourself?

Tyson: Because I studied health administration, I wanted to build on some of the best practices that I found in health care, using acupuncture and Chinese medicine as the model, and blending in the best structures I found. One thing I wanted to do was to have a true group practice. A lot of times, acupuncturists don't really practice as a group. They practice in the same facility, but separately. I'm quite familiar, of course, with how the group practice paradigm runs, how it's set up, so I decided to use it. That's what we're doing here now. Basically, all funds coming in, all billing, is all into the group practice, and then we get paid from that. So there's no individual practice identity, so to speak. When a person comes here, they're coming to Advanced Integrative Health Group, to see whoever's here. And whoever's here is going to be a great practitioner, no matter who it is. It works pretty well, because sometimes we're not available, someone wants to go on a vacation, someone gets sick. We have been able to maintain our revenue because someone will take the load for the other person. The patients don't mind, they see us as one. That was important.

11 MUIH was founded in 1974 under the name College of Chinese Acupuncture, US, and was "the outgrowth of a program begun in Kenilworth, England, in which U.S. students studied acupuncture with Dr. J.R. Worsley." See: <https://muih.edu/about-muih/history/>.

Wu: Your website shows two of you, you and co-founder Cindy Tran. Do you have any ambitions to get larger?

Tyson: Yes. We have another practitioner, an employee, and then we have five students who work with us. But we're in a limited space. We have four treatment rooms, and because of COVID-19 we had to space out our appointments. We are looking to go to a larger space because we always have a lot of interest from practitioners who want to work with us [that] we just don't have the space to accommodate right now.

Wu: Where do your clientele mostly come from?

Tyson: Our office is in Gambrills [Maryland]. I call it Government Corridor because we're five miles from Fort Meade, the army base, and very close to the NSA [National Security Agency], and then we get a lot of people from [Washington,] DC because we're kind of in the middle. Most of our patients are government employees, veterans, government contractors. We have some patients who work for private corporations. And we get a lot of teachers. We serve Anne Arundel County, Prince George's County, and Washington, DC, so we'll get teachers from those areas.

Wu: I noticed on your profile that you personally practice acupuncture, Chinese herbs, and also reiki. What do you find yourself doing most?

Tyson: I practice acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine mostly. Early on, when we opened, I did more reiki, but we hired a reiki practitioner – we have two of them – so I don't really do it much anymore. The demand on me was higher for the acupuncture and the Chinese herbs. I do a lot of Chinese herbal medicine, actually, because I like it.

Wu: Are there certain conditions that are more prevalent among the patients you serve?

Tyson: I would say that we get a lot of fibromyalgia and lupus, autoimmune type [ailments]. We get a lot of back pain, low back pain and neck pain, hip pain, that kind of thing. Most of our patients, I'd say the majority, are over forty. I get a few children. I've treated most of them for attention deficit, like ADHD [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder], and that works pretty well for the calming and focus. I've gotten some sickle cell anemia, for pain with [sickle cell] crisis. We get a lot of PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] and

depression. Anxiety, quite a bit, especially now. That's gone up quite a bit since COVID.

Wu: I want to pivot a little to talk about the acupunctural profession as a whole. When I told my friend Henry Buchtel [former president of the Michigan Society of Acupuncturists] that we were working on this special section on African Americans and Asian medicine, he said, "You should talk to Denise Tyson," because you complained to the ASA –

Tyson: [*Laughing*] I did.

Wu: – after they issued their antiracist statement. It's the statement that's currently at the top of the ASA homepage [asacu.org] which opens with a quote from Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from the Birmingham Jail." It then talks about the need to overcome systemic racism and the ASA's commitment to antiracist practices and creating "a world that is just and safe for all." What was the intent, do you think, of this ASA-NCCAOM statement? What is it you would like them to do differently and better? And how did that conversation with them come about? Because they have taken the criticism seriously and are now trying to do antiracist work in a meaningful way.¹²

Tyson: I'm currently the president of the Maryland Acupuncture Society. So I wrote my own [antiracism] statement to our members, and basically outlined a lot of history that is erased and that people don't know. I put it out there for our members to embrace educating themselves, and for the sake of our medicine that we're practicing. With acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine, there's a great opportunity to help out there. Especially in the Black communities, they're not so educated about Chinese medicine and don't realize the benefits. Myself being a practitioner and having the Black community come to me for the medicine has been really enlightening because a lot of people were afraid of it. They didn't know what it was. Then they came and they love it and

12 In its June 2020 newsletter, the ASA leadership acknowledged the criticism that its joint statement had not specifically mentioned the Black Lives Matter movement. It also announced that the ASA and NCCAOM were undertaking new initiatives, including the development of a cultural competence program for acupuncturists (American Society of Acupuncturists 2020a). As part of this work, in August 2020 the NCCAOM and ASA Acupuncture Medicine Cultural Competency Task Force held a virtual town hall titled "Conversations Around Racism, Bias, Equity and the Acupuncture Profession" (American Society of Acupuncturists 2020b). For a further discussion of cultural competence, see footnote 14 below.

they see how it helps. I think that all acupuncturists, if they have the opportunity to be able to treat the Black community, should do it. A lot of practitioners open their offices in wealthy neighborhoods. I noticed that even when I was in school. And so mostly the affluent are the ones who know about it and benefit. I think more of an effort has to be made for acupuncturists to just go reach out to others outside that community.

Oftentimes the words of Black leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., will be quoted, and then that's it. Like a Band-Aid. And so I guess [the ASA statement] annoyed me at first. I thought, "What is going on?" Because I think I'm the only Black person at all in that whole association to be a [state] delegate [representative to the ASA] or anything else in the leadership. I was curious because they've seen me, they know me, and no one reached out. Well, they said they were reaching out to someone in the leadership of NCCAOM ... [who is] African American. They were looking to her. So I spoke to her because once I knew she was involved, I kind of knew why that statement came out that way.

What happens in these situations, especially to a Black person, is people come up and ask, "Oh, what do we say? How do we respond?" We don't say it, but we're thinking, "You need to find out. Why are you asking me? And you're asking me too soon." Many of us were very hurt when George Floyd was murdered, we were very hurt. It took me three weeks to get to a place where I could even write the letter to our members from the Maryland Association. So when she was approached, it was too soon! A lot of times, people say, "Oh, maybe we should write this, do this" and my answer would be [*resigned tone*] "Okay." Because I can't give myself 100 percent to that. Because the pain's too raw. After speaking with [her], I realized what happened. Then I cooled down because I realized her response probably would have been my response too, given that situation. And they're [the ASA] supposed to work further on that.

I did speak with [an ASA board member], and I mentioned to her about the Black members not really wanting to join their state [acupuncture] association or ASA because they don't feel it's safe. She said to me that she found that also with the Chinese community, that it was the same reaction, and she was wondering why. I said, "I think a lot of it has to do with the overall experience of being ignored, of not really being taken seriously, of only being called upon if it has to do with the 'Black question' but nothing else. Even if you have stellar credentials and education, it's still questioned." That's been my experience.

Now, you know, I'm a delegate [to the ASA], but I found the same reaction. I've been to the [ASA] convention. I don't think anybody knew who I was, ever asked me, or even cared. I was just in the background. It's only now I spoke up about this. "I'm here, I've been here all the time." So that's what I mean by "not safe." It's like you're opening up wounds. You're opening up yourself to be in

this situation that you know is going to happen. You know the questions that are going to come, that don't make sense. And then it puts you back into your anger. So it's self-protection. Like, "Why would I join this organization where I'm the only one, I'm a minority, and I have to deal with this?"

The only way I think state organizations and ASA can get over this hump is they have to *invite*. They have to make the effort. They have to mentor. They have to open the door. "Well, no one applied." No, they're not [applying], because of this. So you have to open it up, and promise to make it safe. And that means just that, that you can come into the organization and we'll listen to you. Come into the organization, and we'll make sure and stand by you if someone is offensive. We have to know that. Then I think especially the Black acupuncturists will feel like they can join up. But what happens now is they do separate groups. They have a separate group for Black acupuncturists, and also in the Chinese community I see separate groups. I think change can't happen unless it's out front, vocal, and people mean it. But right now, it's very lukewarm, and the statement was very lukewarm. It didn't say, "Come on in. We want to do better."

Also, I think ASA has to make an effort to publish and send out communications and post on the website the links to these different histories. They need to be out public, so that people can see it. A lot of people don't know about the connection with the Black Panthers.¹³ A lot of people don't understand about health disparities and the inequity and discrimination in health care that we as acupuncturists can do a whole lot about. We can really make a difference in that. We can help bridge that gap. I do that all the time. I help my patients become advocates for themselves when they're going out into Western medicine, when they're just not being listened to, or [when they're] being grouped together [by stereotypes].

I had my own experience where for years I had high blood pressure readings. They were extremely high; they actually were unusual. I was told, "It's because you're African American, this is why your blood pressure's high," and I said, "No, it isn't." On and on and on. "Here, take this medication. Because

13 The Black Panther Party, founded in 1966, was a revolutionary organization established to fight for African American empowerment and sociopolitical equality. As historian Alondra Nelson has documented, an important aspect of its work was health activism. This included establishing free clinics and advocacy initiatives to improve medical care for African American communities that were both underserved and discriminated against by the medical establishment. See Nelson 2011. The specific role that the Black Panthers and other Black revolutionaries played in disseminating acupuncture knowledge are detailed in this special issue's articles on Tolbert Small. See Burton-Rose and Wu 2021; Meng 2021a, 2021b.

you're African American, this is what you have," and I'm like, "No. I've had every test – kidney, cardiovascular, you name it. Nothing." I said, "You've seen nothing in my body that will say that my blood pressure should be high. You're giving me medication and it's doing nothing. It's not changing the numbers, so you need to find the root of it." And I actually found one good cardiologist, a female cardiologist. Maybe because she was into research, she was just more curious. She sent me for genetic testing, and it turned out that my condition was genetic. It had nothing to do with my being African American, it was just the way I was born. And once they discovered that, they realized I didn't have high blood pressure as you typically know it. It was that I had pressure in my lungs. That's what they were reading. I had fluid. Once I had good diuretics and got the fluid off, my blood pressure's normal. It took all that time, twenty years, and if it wasn't discovered, anything could have happened.

The genetic counselor says, "Ask your family members about it." So I asked my mother. She said, "Oh, yeah, my great-grandmother, she just kind of died in her sleep, in her chair." I said [*laughs*], "Mom, when were you going to tell [me]?" "Oh, I didn't know it mattered about anything." If it's not remedied, the lungs fill with water. I basically would have just drowned – not woken up – if I didn't have the proper diagnosis. So this is dangerous, this is serious, when you have these health disparities and this discrimination and bias in health care. As acupuncturists, and with the medicine we practice, we have a duty to be the ones to correct this [bias]. We can! It's very, very embedded in Western medicine, and that doesn't really exist on the Chinese medicine side because that's not the paradigm. It doesn't fit in there naturally because of how [Chinese] medicine's practiced.

Wu: Because in Chinese medicine you're supposed to see each the individual as a complex assemblage of different things, right? But let me go back to this issue of medical stereotyping. I was looking at the ASA June newsletter, and it starts off with a discussion of cultural competency.¹⁴ Cultural competency is a big issue in biomedicine, but it can be done in a racist way. Like the way

14 At the most basic level, "cultural competence" refers to the ability of practitioners and healthcare systems to engage effectively with patients who come from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. In the US and other white-majority multicultural nations, the promotion of cultural competence in medicine arose from concerns that sociocultural and racial biases were contributing to poor healthcare outcomes and healthcare disparities. See Jongen et al. 2017. However, it has also been observed that unless properly designed and implemented, cultural competence programs can promote and reinforce stereotypes and biases without effectively addressing racism. See Jongen et al. 2017, 115–25; Gregg and Saha 2006.

your doctor was: “Oh, here’s someone who is African American. I’m going to be culturally competent and show that I know that African Americans are prone to high blood pressure.” And then it becomes this algorithm that is not actually helpful. Who do you see as the natural movers within the ASA that will work to do this right so that it isn’t people of color always doing the labor? I noticed, for example, a statement from the student part of the ASA, and they’re really worried about cultural competency. Is there perhaps a generational difference?

Tyson: I think that some of it is generational. I find that especially millennials and Generation Z are more open, more socially conscious, and of course I think that comes down from parents.¹⁵ My son’s twenty-seven, and he’s very socially conscious about everything – you know, the planet – and he was always that way. In the whole movement and the protests, they’ve been a catalyst. They don’t stand down, and that’s good.

Some of it is just money. It’s class structure. You’ll find that people want to protect their wealth. They want to protect their social standing and their affluence. Having to change threatens it in a big way. I wrote my letter [to the MAS] and I got a response from one acupuncturist who said that he was not going to rejoin with the association because he felt like we were being political. Why was I writing about my personal experience that has nothing to do with acupuncture and Chinese medicine! So that attitude is there. I’ve seen some change, with people learning the history. That’s the most important thing. When you live off of a false, contrived history, then your thinking is just not going to be aligned with where we want to go because you don’t have the facts. And there’s some who are just stuck.

I think in ASA it’s going to have to be pushed from the top. If the board doesn’t make a stand and say, “Look, this is what we’re doing. We’re going to put the history out there, we’re going to put these cultural competency courses out here, it needs to be mandatory,” it’s not going to happen. Even with the issue of taking the word “Oriental” out [of the names of Asian medicine organizations].¹⁶

15 In US discussions of social generational cohorts, the term millennials refers to people born in the 1980s through mid-1990s, and Generation Z refers to people born after the late 1990s onwards. Dimock 2019.

16 In the US, the institutions that teach and govern the practice of medicines originating in Asia have historically used the appellation “Oriental medicine.” On July 15, 2020, the organization Influential Point, founded by acupuncturist Tamsin Lee, launched an online petition calling on these organizations to eliminate the “O-word” from their names. It pointed out that Oriental is now acknowledged to be a pejorative term rooted in Euro-American colonialism and associated with a history of anti-Asian racism. This petition sharpened existing critiques within integrative medicine, and additional organizations subsequently

I just looked at a [social media] discussion today where a person was saying, “Well, I don’t know why that has to change. I don’t think it’s offensive.” And everybody was like, “What? What planet are you on?” Someone posted the history of how the word [Oriental] was used, who came up with it, the roots in colonialism, and then, the person said, “Oh. Oh, okay.” This person had no clue. I don’t know where they thought it came from, but you have to look at how it’s used, why it was used. It’s like the “Redskins” [team name] in football.¹⁷ “What’s wrong with that?” Because of what it means, how it was used! A lot of people just don’t know. That’s where we have to go, that kind of history. ASA should post that history with how the word Oriental was used. Maybe then people would see the light. Maybe people could see that, from centuries ago, there’s been cooperation between different cultures, different countries. It’s not new, Africa and China, it isn’t. But they don’t know that.

Wu: What kind of conversations are you hearing at MUIH?

Tyson: I think the initiatives that are coming out of the school right now are from the students. I know they went to the top, and out of that came some initiatives to do better. At one point, I remember, in a student clinic, someone had written up rules about your natural hair, having it out and such.¹⁸ That’s really how the diversity committee came about, because we were addressing this issue. You can’t have that [hair discrimination] happen unless you have more than one person, or some type of leadership, who has that kind of thought because otherwise it would have been deemed inappropriate from the beginning. I think it’s being rooted out now, and that’s good, because we need to see what’s there. Overall, the whole medicine embodies looking at the individual,

began to reconsider and revise their nomenclature. For an overview, see Weeks 2020c. For the Facebook post launching the petition, see Influential Point 2020.

17 From 1933 to July 2020 the National Football League team based in Washington, DC, was called the “Redskins.” The owners had long rejected criticisms that this was a derogatory term for indigenous peoples, and they refused to change the name. However, the calls for racial justice that followed the murder of George Floyd put pressure on the NFL’s financial sponsors, and thus on the team owners, who finally agreed to rename their football team. Keim 2020.

18 The racial biases against Black people include the idea that their appearance is inappropriate unless their hairstyles conform to those based on the hair texture of European-descended people. These prejudices appear in school and work dress codes that forbid hairstyles based on the natural texture of Black people’s hair. In 2019 an alliance of civil rights groups and the company Dove launched a nationwide initiative to pass laws in each state to outlaw “race-based hair discrimination.” The CROWN Act; see <https://www.thecrownact.com/>.

the complexities of the individual, as a whole, and everything as one system. To be this way [racially biased] is just in opposition. Maybe with historical reference, and some – counseling, something like that [*laughs*] – people can see that you're in opposition to what you practice, what you study. You have to see that, and then that would help. But some people feel it's not a part of them, you know, "That's not happening here, that's not relevant here!" Like the guy who told me, "That's not relevant to acupuncture and Chinese medicine!" Of course it is! Because we're health providers.

Wu: As an editor, I've also been thinking how to frame this issue. We have an international readership, and some people may say, "that has nothing to do with us! It's a US issue." But Asian medicine practitioners are in a subordinate power relation with biomedicine, and to survive you have to make yourself acceptable to biomedicine. It's fair to ask how alternative medicine may have uncritically replicated the inequities of biomedicine.

Tyson: I think that part of it is that people enter the country, get treated badly, but then somehow a little bit of amends is made, depending on where you are. But with Black people, it's unique, because we always stay at the bottom. It creates that tension, too, with people from other cultures because they always manage to get ahead. And because of that unique relationship with the descendants of free slaves, that underlying guilt is there. You had free labor to literally build this country. And if you recognize that, if you bring that to the forefront, what does that say? Because you have never reconciled those issues.

White settlers came here, and they tried to force the indigenous people here to [work] but just made them sick. Then you bring in Africans to do the work, build everything, but then decide, "You're like an animal, you're less than a person." That kind of thought doesn't just change. So now for generations and generations, it's still the underlying thing: you're less. Even in health care, you're less. "You have higher tolerance for pain." "You just have those diseases." "You don't need any pain medications because you're susceptible to being a drug addict." It's there and it never leaves. There is discrimination, racism toward many different people, but it's unique for African Americans in this country. They brought us here for a specific reason, and then when it was done, they literally just didn't want us here. And it's "Where do we put you?" We're going to confine you to these spaces, and to these particular jobs. You can't get a bank loan, you can't – you know. It continues to today.

Then friction is created; or, I should say, it's contrived. A lot of times there is no inherent tension, but it's put there to say, "These people here are better than you." So then the Black community feels like, "Oh ..." And it happens a lot.

People see the Asian businesses, and they'll say, "How can you come in here and have a business in the Black neighborhood?" But they don't understand that it [the problem] is not the person having the business. It's how they're able to get that lease, or how they're able to get that financial assistance, that you're not eligible for.¹⁹ It causes tension because you're blaming these people and not blaming the structural racism. And it pits different people and immigrants against each other. Knowing history is important so that people can see that no one really escapes the racism. I was watching the documentary *Asian Americans* recently,²⁰ and I was telling my family and friends to watch it because it did a good job showing the history and the relationship between the Black community and the Asian community. A lot of people didn't realize that Chinese Americans were lynched. I say, "Yes, they were." Why were there so many Chinese restaurants? Because it was the only business they would allow a Chinese person to do! They couldn't dig for gold. "You're just here to build the railroads."²¹

All of us have to understand each other's histories. That's where the healing begins, that you understand what happened. Instead of just allowing the perpetrators of the [racism] who are trying to hold everybody down. I think that the reason why there's so much movement with Black people when it comes to civil rights is because we were the ones that from the beginning were here, putting together what they call America. So what really defines freedom in

19 Voluminous scholarship has documented the history and present-day repercussions of government and business policies that specifically discriminated against African Americans in housing and bank loans. A detailed recent survey written for US policymakers is Solomon, Maxwell, and Castro 2019. For two influential monographs, see Katznelson 2005 and Rothstein 2017.

20 *Asian Americans* is a five-hour documentary series on the history of Asians in the US, produced for the Public Broadcasting System (PBS). It first aired on PBS on May 11, 2020, and is now streaming on the web: <https://www.pbs.org/weta/asian-americans/>. In May 2021, it was nominated for a prestigious Peabody Award recognizing excellence in television, podcast/radio, and digital media.

21 Here Tyson references well-known episodes in the history of nineteenth-century US racial animus against Chinese immigrants: "foreign miners taxes" designed to make it prohibitively expensive for Chinese immigrants to mine gold (1850–52); the recruitment of cheaply paid Chinese laborers to build the transcontinental railroad (1863–69); and riots against and mass murders of Chinese immigrants (notably in Los Angeles, California, in 1871 and Rock Springs, Wyoming, in 1885). Historian Heather Ruth Lee has also shown how the growth in Chinese restaurants after 1915 was driven by the strategies that Chinese people used to immigrate to the US despite the restrictions of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. The act forbade the entry of all Chinese laborers, but it allowed merchants (including, eventually, restaurant owners) to bring in workers. See Lee 2014 and Godoy 2016.

America is *our* freedom in America. I read an editorial by a guy from India, and he was saying that as immigrants come in, they really need to understand and embrace the history of Black people in this country. Because no one could have come in here [to the US] and do what they're doing until we had gone in and done what we did.²² A lot of people will say, "Oh, you're saying Black Lives Matter. It's like nobody else matters?" That's not the point. I'm saying, this is foundational stuff. You have to look at how this country was laid down, and how it's not acknowledged. And when it is acknowledged and when you set it straight, it's good for everyone.

For me, it's been an education to see how prevalent it was among acupuncturists, to see people bringing the same biases and attitudes. It is disappointing. But I think that we can do better, and it doesn't have to be just the Black people carrying it all. There's plenty of research, plenty of videos to learn from. ASA can help but they just need to post it. They need to be responsible for doing it. If they want advice about the material or something like that, fine. But they have to do the work.

Wu: I'd like to wrap up by asking where you see this all going. I don't want to impose any optimism on this because I think we're at a moment in history that is very dark. And what we're trying to do is make it not so dark. We've seen so many instances in the past where it seems like "We're going to move forward, people are ready to make changes," and then after a while, people get distracted by something else. Are there any things that you've seen in recent weeks that make you feel that some meaningful forward motion can be achieved right now?

Tyson: Except for that one person, a lot of the posts on acupuncturist [social media] and in response to my letter were very supportive, and people did say they wanted to do things. They wanted to donate, they wanted to be active in providing acupuncture for trauma for protesters and things like that. A lot of them have read, watched videos, educated themselves. I see them also actively posting history and everything to others' [social media feeds], which is great. Passing it on, so they're learning. That is the opening, that is the start. Because you can't really fight this fight unless you know what's going on, what's

22 The African American Civil Rights Movement was responsible for a larger shift in sociopolitical attitudes that led to the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. This act abolished the restrictive national origin immigration quotas – rooted in white supremacist and eugenicist views – that had drastically curtailed the immigration of non-Europeans to the US. One result of the 1965 act was a surge in immigration from Asia. See Chishti, Hipsman, and Ball 2015.

happening, and what's been done. Just like the Confederate statues, people saying, "Oh, it's pulling down history [to remove them]."²³ No. That's not "history." That [erecting statues] was done for a purpose, to antagonize and intimidate. And we have to keep on publicizing it. Everybody needs to know. Keep your eyes open. Never sleep on this. Because it's not corrected. It's not close.

The positive opening, or the optimism, is that people are actually learning. It's not a good history, but we need to know it. Some people are like, "Oh! I just don't want to look at that." You need to. You have to look at it. It's sad, it's terrible, it's awful. Horrendous. But you have to see it, because we become blind when we don't look at these things. And every day there's something to learn. We have to keep our eyes open, because the people who do these things, their eyes are open. You know? They're not sleeping. They're out here doing what they're doing. So we need to be vigilant. We really do. And information is key. We don't have to have the niceties, "Oh, I'm sorry." No, just send the facts out so people can know and be educated about it. Because what's terribly wrong right now is that we unfortunately got inundated with half-truths. We need to know. We need to know about who was here, and what was done, and who's still here. We need to reach out. And I think that's important.

Below is the statement that Denise Tyson emailed to the membership of the Maryland Acupuncture Society on June 20, 2020.

[Email subject line:] MAS President Speaks Out Against Racism

On May 25, 2020, Minneapolis police officers arrested George Floyd, a 46-year-old black man, and he did not make it home alive. The entire world watched as one of the police officers used his knee on George Floyd's neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds to murder him as the police team assisted. As a Black woman who has experienced decades of racial discrimination and microaggressions at predominately white universities, at the workplace, and this professional association, I was angry but not surprised. This murder added to the long list of Black brothers and sisters who have been murdered by the

23 The Confederate States of America was established in 1861 by Southern states who seceded from the US in order to preserve their right to enslave African-descended people. Although the South lost the ensuing civil war, white supremacists succeeded in popularizing a sanitized and romanticized version of the Southern cause, flying the Confederate flag and erecting public monuments to the Confederacy. After the killing of George Floyd, the racist origins of these public symbols could no longer be plausibly denied. According to the civil rights advocacy organization Southern Law Poverty Center, over 160 of these symbols were removed or renamed in 2020 following the murder of Floyd. Vigdor and Victor 2021.

police. The resulting protests throughout the world were encouraging. Change is happening and we need to take care of ourselves and each other. This is not the time to offer sympathetic words, quote civil rights leaders or short-lived gestures. This is the time to take action by not ignoring racism, but by taking a stand against racism with financial contributions, participating in protests, learning everything about the history of the Transatlantic African slave trade, economic inequity, health disparities, education inequality, redlining, mass incarceration, microaggressions, white privilege and more.

Yesterday marked the celebration of Juneteenth. On June 19, 1865, the Union soldiers, led by Major General Gordon Granger, landed at Galveston, Texas with news that the war had ended and that the enslaved were now free. Note that this was two and a half years *after* President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, which had become official January 1, 1863. The Emancipation Proclamation had little impact on the Texans due to the minimal number of Union troops available to enforce the new Executive Order. However, with the surrender of General Lee in April of 1865, and the arrival of General Granger's regiment, the forces were finally strong enough to influence and overcome the resistance.

Slaves were freed on paper, but the poverty, poor diet, stress, and chronic health issues continued. Ultimately, there was no true freedom as newly Black freed slaves were quickly forced into another type of slavery known as the Black Code. A freed slave could be arrested for vagrancy such as being unemployed or loitering. Once arrested the prisoner was required to work under a labor contract to a white person to work off their punishment. These laws were designed to force black people back to the plantations to work without compensation. This practice continued in many different forms and is the basis for mass incarceration of black people today, who are used as low-cost labor for major corporations. With all this abuse and disregard, black people continued to persevere but with prevailing poor health conditions, stress, and lack of resources.

In 1921, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, a community of black people were massacred, and their entire community was destroyed, looted, and bombed by white people who were deputized by law enforcement and the United States National Guard. This thriving black community of wealth and self-sufficiency, Greenwood, also known as the Black Wall Street, was a model of progress with the opportunity for Black citizens to pass wealth to next generations. Systemic racism continued with the support of U.S. Presidents and government agencies with the practice of redlining to block Black people from purchasing property and homes in prime communities or obtaining mortgage loans. This situation

impacted accessibility to adequate schools and health care. Entrepreneurship was also impeded by blocking Black people from business loans and prime commercial property. Consequently, it made it impossible for Black families to accumulate wealth to pass to the next generation.

Imagine a world where you are kidnapped from your home and family by slave traders and chained in the filthy dark belly of a ship for months suffering with hunger and illness. Taken thousands of miles to a strange land to be physically and mentally abused continuously as you build a country in which you have no rights, no freedom, and no opportunity. Finally, one day you are told you are free, but you have nothing of your own even though you grew all the food and built all the shelters. When you do find a way to build something of your own, the descendants of the slave owners, burn to the ground everything that you just built, and you are left with nothing. Imagine your state of mind at that moment when you feel no hope.

Four hundred thirty-one (431) years of the Transatlantic African slave trade in the Americas and 155 years of continued oppression of the descendants of African slaves in the United States have created a system of racism, producing inequity in housing, education, health care, economics, and human rights for Black Americans. These poor conditions, physical and mental trauma, and epigenetics led to the health disparities prevalent in the United States today. Health disparities have always been a constant for people of color, and now the current COVID-19 global pandemic has magnified this issue and brought it to forefront. As acupuncturists, we have an opportunity to use our training and experience to treat the whole person and offer healing to those who have been traumatized by racism. It is time to study our country's history of racial inequality, the post-traumatic stress of people of color and create a space for healing in your practice.

From the start of the current protests about police violence toward Black people and systemic racism, I have viewed the many posts on Facebook of acupuncturists in Maryland and nationwide who are educating themselves and their colleagues about the facts of racism and white privilege. Thank you to all of you who are taking a stand against systemic racism in the United States and the world.

BLACK LIVES MATTER!

I barely grazed the surface of the full history of the Black American experience. I encourage you to explore and learn more. I am available to continue

this important conversation and may be contacted at [MAS president's official email address²⁴]:

Dr. Denise Tyson, MBA, DOM, LAc
 President, Maryland Acupuncture Society
 Maryland Representative (Alternate), American Society of Acupuncturists

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24 Editor's note: We have redacted the email address provided in the original statement since Tyson's term as MAS president expires in March 2022.

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