

# Teaching nurses how to address, manage and mitigate racial bias

Dionne Wright Poulton



## ABSTRACT

The year 2020, ironically afforded us an opportunity to clearly see the deep impact of racism and racial bias on black and brown people around the world. From Covid-19 disproportionately effecting and infecting black and brown people—taking the lives of thousands, to the shockingly heinous murder of George Floyd, for many witnesses it was a unique, eye-opening experience; while for others it was a, “It’s about time” moment that finally and unequivocally elucidated the tragic lived experiences of black and brown people in our society. That said, these events should not have been a surprise to nurses or any other healthcare workers—especially in the United States. According to the Center for Disease Control, black women are three to four times more likely to die from pregnancy-related causes than white women, and the US has the worst pregnancy-related death rates than in any industrialized country—including behind Mexico and Uzbekistan. Researchers posit the root cause of these tragic statistics is racism, which is succinctly defined by Pat Bidol as “Racism=Prejudice + Power.” This equation is especially helpful for Chief Diversity Officers in healthcare systems to reference when educating nurses about the adverse impact of racism and racial bias on the lived experiences of black and brown people. It is an equation that by definition conveys to all healthcare professionals, their potential to practice racism and racial bias without full awareness or intent, since research suggests there is an involuntary component to how the brain makes snap judgments, associations and categorizations in order to make sense of the world.

Teaching nurses to consider racial bias as a possible influence on their practice is not an indictment on these professionals. It is education. This presentation provides a specific strategy for Chief Diversity Officers to address resistance from nurses in healthcare systems who might reject the notion that as members of a “helping profession,” that they could ever harbor or potentially exhibit racial biases toward black and brown patients and potentially perpetuate racism and stereotypes that lead to adverse outcomes.

## BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Dionne Wright Poulton is Vice President and Chief Diversity Officer at Care New England Health System in the State of Rhode Island where she oversees all diversity, equity and inclusion endeavors involving almost 8,000 employees and many thousands of patients served each year at three hospitals, four healthcare facilities, and at 80+ ambulatory sites across the State. She is a leading expert on DEI, unconscious bias, and transformational adult learning and behavior, and is a certified K-12 teacher with degrees from Rice University, University of Toronto, San Francisco State University, and a Ph.D. from the University of Georgia. Dr. Poulton also sits on several Boards, and has been featured in Forbes for her work. She is also author of the acclaimed book, *It’s Not Always Racist...but Sometimes It Is: Reshaping How We Think About Racism* (2014, Archway Publishing); and is host of the popular podcast, “The Dr. Dionne Show,” which focuses on DEI in the workplace and beyond. Dr. is a proud mom of two teenaged girls.

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