

By Tonya Russell

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The protests over the deaths of black men and women at the hands of police have turned attention to other American institutions, including health care, where some members of the profession are calling for transformation of a system they say results in poorer health for black Americans because of deep-rooted racism.

"Racism is a public health emergency of global concern," a recent editorial in the [Lancet](#) said. "It is the root cause of continued disparities in death and disease between Black and white people in the USA."

A [New England Journal of Medicine](#) editorial puts it this way: "Slavery has produced a legacy of racism, injustice, and brutality that runs from 1619 to the present, and that legacy infects medicine as it does all social institutions."

The novel coronavirus has provided the most recent reminder of the disparities, with black Americans falling ill and dying from covid-19 at [higher rates](#) than whites. Even so, the NEJM editorial noted, "when physicians describing its manifestations have presented images of dermatologic effects, black skin has not been included. The 'covid toes' have all been pink and white."

Doctors, nurses and other health workers gathered to support protesters opposing police brutality in New York on June 5. White Coats for Black Lives brought the group together. (Holly Pickett for The Washington Post)

sugar, or why some studies cite a fourfold greater risk of visual loss from diabetes complications in black people?"

Douroudian's patients who have never met with a dietitian in most cases have also never even heard of a dietitian, she says, and she is unsure why they don't have this information.

Her remedy is teaching her patients how to advocate for themselves:

"I tell my diabetic patients to demand a referral from their [primary care physician] or endocrinologist. If for some reason that doctor declines, I tell them to ask to see where they documented in their medical record that the patient is struggling to control their blood sugar and the doctor is declining to provide the referral. Hint: You'll get your referral real fast."

"That work begins with being an outspoken advocate for black patients and [reproductive justice](#)," she says. "This means listening to black patients and centering their lived experiences — holding my patients' expertise over their own bodies in equal or higher power to my expertise as a physician — and letting that guide my decisions and actions."

