

Historians and the Healthcare of African Americans

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Medical College

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When I was professor and chairman of surgery at Meharry Medical College from 1987 to 1990, I came across some of Todd Savitt, PhD's work while browsing through the Meharry archives. It was very clear that he was perhaps the preeminent medical historian in America when it came to African Americans and issues of healthcare in this country. I was in the process of trying to visit him at East Carolina University (ECU) School of Medicine in Greenville, NC, when I relocated to SUNY–Buffalo and became preoccupied with myriad other things.

Last year, when researching the literature for my article in the September education issue of *JNMA* ("A Century after Flexner: The Need for Reform in Medical Education from College and Medical School through Residency Training," *J Natl Med Assoc.* 2005;97:1232–1239), his name surfaced once again as the author of a chapter entitled, "Abraham Flexner and the Black Medical Schools" in the 1992 book by Barbara Barzansky and Norman Gevitz. I was able to contact him to discuss some of the finer points of the manuscript and informed him that I would be happy to travel to ECU to meet with him. He arranged for me to give the Fourth Annual Brody Lecture at ECU in March of 2006, and we had the opportunity to explore our mutual interest in the medical history of African Americans and healthcare in this country.

Since assuming the editorship of *JNMA*, a goal has always been to establish a monthly column of African-American medical history for the benefit of our readership. I invited Savitt to join the editorial board of *JNMA* to help with this initiative, and we were absolutely delighted

that he accepted the offer. I found it necessary to rely heavily upon his manuscript mentioned above in another writing project that I was invited to join, and again, Savitt was one of the external reviewers for this project.

There are a number of issues presently at play across the country that are threatening the security of some of the existing black medical schools, and I thought that this would be the appropriate time to republish Savitt's original 1992 manuscript so that our readers could compare then with now and decide on a strategy intended to help our schools not only survive, but to prosper. We were indeed pleased when Greenwood Press agreed to allow *JNMA* to republish Savitt's article.

I happened to be discussing the effect of the Flexner Report on black schools in the presence of Kathryn Moseley, MD, lecturer in the Department of Pediatrics at the University of Michigan at a recent meeting in Chicago, and, once again, Savitt's article surfaced. I advised her that we were going to reprint the article in *JNMA* in September 2006 and invited her to write an editorial as to whether she thought that the original Flexner Report was unduly harsh on the existing black medical schools. I invited her to choose whether she wanted to write the "pro" or "con" editorial, and that I would write the opposite piece for the sake of a presentation, although I might not necessarily believe in the position that I was to write about. She elected to write the "yes, it was harmful" piece, and I had to assume the editor's burden.

In fact, as I began doing my internal soul searching for answers, I began to believe that the original Flexner Report actually helped preserve two black schools—Howard and Meharry—both of which might well have closed along with the other five schools scattered across the southeast, absent Flexner's direct and tangential support. The editorials by Moseley and me follow Savitt's full manuscript. I have taken the liberty of listing Savitt's additional works as a short bibliography here.

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