

UTHSC DEPARTMENT OF SURGERY STATEMENT

Dear Colleagues:

The recent and horrific deaths of George Floyd, and other African Americans – Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, have further unmasked the structural nature of racism and social injustice that have, for far too long, plagued our country. These events have been starkly juxtaposed on the glaring health disparities and social inequalities that have been laid bare by the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the African American population. As we stand in solidarity with African American communities across the country and share in their grief, we strongly affirm that Black Lives Matter.

Our collective history has led us to a society where African Americans, and other minorities, are systematically marginalized, often second-guessed, and increasingly feel alien in their own country. Our African American colleagues have raised these injustices for many years, and the AAMC reminds us that the number of black men in medical schools today is lower than what it was in 1970. These recent events cannot stand in isolation and must also drive further change and heighten the prioritization of diversity and inclusion efforts in our own department and institution.

Though we operate in the City of Memphis, with a majority African American population, very few of our faculty and residents are African American. The leadership of the UTHSC College of Medicine (under Dean Strome) and the Department of Surgery have recognized this issue and have been active in attempting to build a more diverse team of students, residents, fellows and faculty; however, progress clearly remains insufficient. We must admit that there is a problem and that we have a moral obligation to appropriately and definitively address this issue. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr astutely reminded us, *“our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”*

A goal established at the beginning of this academic year was the development of a Diversity and Inclusion Task Force within the Department of Surgery. In April, the objectives were finalized and a discussion regarding leadership and oversight was initiated. Although this was a long time in coming, the timing could not have been more important during this critical period. We are honored that Dr. Carissa Webster-Lake, Division of Vascular Surgery, has agreed to serve as the Department’s Officer of Diversity and Inclusion and will lead the committee’s transparent effort to examine our department, help us identify our blind spots, shed light on invisible barriers that negatively affect underrepresented minorities and help us accelerate our drive towards a more open, inclusive and diverse department. In addition to Dr. Webster-Lake, the department is deeply grateful to Drs. Alexander Feliz, Division of Pediatric Surgery, and Denis Foretia, Division of General Surgery, for their current and future guidance.

As a department, we cannot and will not remain indifferent to the plight of our African American and minority colleagues and their respective communities. In these difficult times, the words of Rosa Parks sadly and strikingly still ring true: “Racism is still with us. But it is up to us to prepare our children for what they have to meet, and, hopefully, we shall overcome.” Although we may not necessarily be implicated for the past, we as a department and as engaged citizens, are fully responsible for what we do today and the future that we build for ourselves and those that follow us. We anticipate working closely together with all of you to chart this important path forward.

Thank you and stay safe.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'D. Shibata', is written over a faint, light blue rectangular background.

David Shibata, MD FACS FASCRS
Scheinberg Endowed Chair in Surgery
Professor and Chair
UTHSC Department of Surgery