



Racism in science: a perspective from Gene Therapy

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On June 16th, *Gene Therapy*'s editorial team convened over a video call from all corners of the globe and spent significant time discussing racism in science: what is happening, what can we do and what should we do? The legacy imparted to me by my predecessor was a diverse group of associate editors—one from each continent (this brings its own challenges, even to set up a video call). But it also profoundly influences a discussion on racism in science and provides us with a unique opportunity.

Promoting diversity is already a cornerstone of our journal because—as one of our editors states—we all recognise that “diversity breeds innovation, brings in thought, and science is about thought”. At GT we have made a concerted effort to encourage diverse submissions by introducing simple ways to support authors better. One example is that we do not ‘auto-reject’ a manuscript based on language; we focus on the science and encourage revision, providing direction and language support if required. In another, more proactive approach, for the last six months we have been inviting manuscripts and commentaries from under-represented groups in science for an upcoming special edition.

Our editorial team may congratulate itself on its global representation, but of the seven of us only one is Black. So whilst the promotion of all diversity is pivotal to good science, our editorial team's conversation in June centred on Black scientists specifically. This was important in the context of #BlackLivesMatter globally. Perhaps, as suggested by others like Jasmine Roberts, we should simply use our inherent training as researchers and educators to do just that: research and educate to action change [1]. We are

after all, one would hope, scientists who are good at solving problems. And so, we first challenged ourselves to better understand the issues specific to being a Black scientist.

The tone of the discussion was open. The points raised, diverse. In the end, there were many suggestions of what we should and could do. Obviously, calls for statements of solidarity were made; satirical editorials that provoke debate/discussions were suggested; engagements with industry to create fellowships for Black scientists in gene therapy were lauded. The discussion was even more valuable for its inclusion of regional diversity, because the perspectives and issues raised in South America, for example, were different from those in Africa. This is exemplified by one of the stories revealed by an American scientist on #BlackInTheIvory, for whom working as a scientist in Africa made her finally feel normal, rather than “other”. Compare that to the example of this editor-in-chief, whose boss, boss' boss, and boss' boss' boss are all Black. At my institute Black researchers in science are the *norm*. That by no means reflects an absence of racism experienced by my Black colleagues in South Africa or elsewhere in the world, as is blatantly apparent when I ask them; the same versions of the sentiments of being ‘less’ or ‘other’ frequently come to the fore, the same microaggressions are felt. Thus, despite the fact that we talk about race a lot in South Africa—food for thought perhaps for other countries—the norm I described for my situation does not represent all institutes across the country. Yet, we are surrounded by examples to prevent this. Think of the giants of science from whom we can learn, such as the late Professor Bongani Mayosi (a pioneer of cardiogenetics in Africa amongst many other things), and his assertion that we should all strive to “lift others as we rise” [2].

What we should and could do to action change *effectively* as editors in addition to our role as scientists in our personal capacity soon became the core focus of the discussion. As a small editorial team at an internationally-recognised journal, we all acknowledge the privileged space we occupy as academics and as editorial ‘gate-keepers’. Therefore we wanted to unanimously outline commitments that were meaningful, achievable and impactful.

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With that in mind, the editorial team at *Gene Therapy* makes the following pledges:

1. **A Statement of Solidarity:** We recognise racism is wrong. It is a systemic issue worldwide and there are structural, organisational, practical, political, cultural and individual barriers to stopping racism. *Gene Therapy* stands in solidarity with all Black scientists and commits to fostering diversity and inclusion in its authorship and editorial team; we will advocate Springer-Nature to diversify the journal's board and decision-making committees/groups. We know racism has persisted over centuries of exploitation and marginalization of Black people. We commit to brave conversations, such as this first one, and to take bold actions, as individual scientists and as an editorial team. We further look forward to these statements of principle leading to items of action.
2. We commit to researching and to educating ourselves and our colleagues on the challenges faced by Black scientists. We will read #BlackInTheIvory stories. We will read about 100 inspiring Black scientists in America [3], and then read about 100 more. We will read articles like those written by Neil A. Lewis Jr [4] and consider how these may change our perspective.
3. **Highlighting Black researchers in *Gene Therapy*:** The argument for why race matters in science mentoring has been made [5]. Surely it is abnormal for “some Black women to not encounter another Black woman in science over the entire course of earning a Ph.D.?” [6]. As we have seen, highlighting Black scientists in America is encouraging, but the issue is global. After Prof Paula Hammond delivered a lecture in Australia as recently as 2018, a young Black woman stood up and said “I am so incredibly excited to see you here and listen to you speak. You are the first Black Professor I've seen in my career”.

Some may argue that we did not shift the needle in one discussion, but our initial engagement has ensured our team is grappling with the issue at hand. As one of the editors said to me after our meeting, “if only we had those discussions at my institute, we'd get things done”. I would like to challenge all editorial teams to have the same discussion and keep talking. The field of gene therapy is considered by many to be relatively new in biomedical science. Perhaps, our ‘relative youth’ offers us an opportunity to prevent the same inherent prejudices ingrained in the older disciplines. As another member of the editorial team put it, “the strength of movements like #BlackLivesMatter shines the spotlight on much-needed societal faults that must be fixed, must change—and we are the solution.”

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The author declares that she has no conflict of interest.

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