Advancing health equity: The Association of Black Gastroenterologists and Hepatologists

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The Association of Black Gastroenterologists and Hepatologists is a new organization that aims to improve gastrointestinal health outcomes in Black communities, foster networking and scholarship among its members, develop the pipeline of Black gastroenterologists and hepatologists, and promote health equity in the fields of gastroenterology and hepatology.

Black Americans are 20% more likely to be diagnosed with colorectal cancer (CRC) and 40% more likely to die from the disease than white Americans1. Black men and women have the highest incidence of pancreatic cancer with at least 30% higher rates than other racial groups2. The prevalence of hepatitis C virus infection is highest among Black Americans in the USA1.

As Black Gastroenterologists and Hepatologists in the USA, we take these statistics seriously, and even personally. Black communities in the USA have been plagued by unmitigated health disparities in several areas, including cardiovascular, gastrointestinal and neoplastic diseases1. CRC is an example of a preventable disease with various screening methods and effective treatment modalities. Yet, disparities in incidence, morbidity and mortality among Black individuals have persisted in the USA since the late 1980s1. Given these circumstances, it is clear that more is needed to bring awareness of and resolutions to disparities in digestive health diseases.

An important aspect of addressing health-care inequities in the Black community involves bolstering the physician workforce most likely to treat underserved populations. Studies suggest that physicians from under-represented backgrounds are more likely to provide health care for underserved patients4. However, Black physicians are few in number in the fields of gastroenterology and hepatology. Despite representing 13% of the general population, Black individuals were less likely to have health insurance, less likely to have a regular source of care, and have higher rates of hospitalization than non-Black individuals5.

Within a matter of days of receiving the news about Mr Boseman’s passing, our professional network of eleven Black gastroenterologists and hepatologists from around the country produced a CRC public service announcement (blackingastro.org) about the effect of CRC in the Black community. The creation of the video marked the public declaration of our organization. The affirmative feedback we received from our colleagues and patients gave further credence to our mission — that the Association of Black Gastroenterologists and Hepatologists (ABGH) would be a space to discuss health conditions that disproportionately affect Black communities and a place to engender community among Black gastroenterologists and hepatologists.

In February 2021, we opened ABGH to membership during our inaugural virtual event and welcomed over 100 practicing gastroenterologists and hepatologists.
Table 1 | Disparities in gastrointestinal and liver conditions

| Condition                                      | Disparity (compared with white Americans) |
|------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| **Gastrointestinal-related**                   |                                           |
| Oesophageal squamous cell carcinoma            | Increased incidence, mortality            |
| Gastric cancer                                 | Increased incidence, mortality            |
| Small bowel cancer                             | Increased incidence, mortality            |
| Acute pancreatitis                             | Increased incidence, mortality            |
| Pancreatic cancer                              | Increased incidence, mortality            |
| Colorectal Cancer                              | Increased incidence, mortality            |
| **Liver-related**                              |                                           |
| Hepatitis B virus infection                    | Increased incidence, mortality            |
| Hepatitis C virus infection                    | Increased incidence, mortality            |
| Liver transplantation                          | Lower incidence                           |
| Liver cancer                                   | Increased incidence, mortality            |

A sample of gastrointestinal and liver conditions for which there are incidence and mortality disparities between Black Americans and white Americans.

Researchers, trainees and medical students from around the world committed to improving gastrointestinal health outcomes in Black communities. By inviting medical and graduate student members, we aim to increase the pipeline of individuals who will pursue medical and research careers in digestive health. For junior faculty members, we will provide career guidance, promote community and demystify the promotions process within academic institutions that stymies so many individuals of color from career advancement. Our mid-career and senior members will provide critical guidance to early-career and trainee members as well as opportunities for mentorship and sponsorship in national organizations and academia. Developing and fostering a strong pipeline of physicians and scientists who promote diversity, inclusion, and health equity within Black communities will be emphasized in our networking, mentorship, and community-facing activities.

In line with these goals, our first community-targeted event was a virtual webinar in March 2021 to raise awareness about CRC risk and screening during ‘Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month’. More than 200 individuals registered for the event, during which a panel of medical experts, patient survivors and advocates shared their personal accounts related to CRC and helped debunk myths about the disease. Our survivor panelists shared compelling stories about their diagnosis with CRC, the loss of loved ones, and misconceptions about the disease, ending by urging listeners to pay attention to the symptoms of CRC and to get screened. Our forum was a space within which Black voices, stories, and experiences were heard and acknowledged and in which attendees received life-saving information. It is our intention that similar community events will improve awareness of the broad spectrum of gastrointestinal and hepatologic diseases affecting Black communities (Table 1). In addition, we hope these forums will empower individuals as they access and navigate the health-care system.

ABGH will continue to contribute to the current medical and health landscape by cultivating collaboration among academic institutions, professional medical societies and the Black community. We stand among many organizations dedicated to eliminating health disparities, and our unique approach is in galvanizing Black gastroenterologists and hepatologists from around the country to specifically address these issues. Ultimately, we hope to extend the efforts to other countries and regions, advancing the work to increase representation and address disparities globally. The formation of ABGH is a major milestone in our field. As we advocate for equity in digestive health and professional representation, we remain committed to our most fervent mission of being the positive change agent our society needs and that our patients deserve.

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Competing interests
The authors declare no competing interests.

RELATED LINKS
CRC public service announcement: https://youtu.be/tDy2hj92dGI
The Association of Black Gastroenterologists and Hepatologists: https://blackingastro.org/

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