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“Black Lives Matter and Black Research Matters”: the African Society of Human Genetics’ call to halt racism in science

Ambroise Wonkam\textsuperscript{a,b,*}, Soraya Bardien\textsuperscript{c,d}, Rokhaya Ndiaye Diallo\textsuperscript{e}, Amadou Gaye\textsuperscript{f}, Mohamed Zahir Alimohamed\textsuperscript{b,h}, Siana Kya\textsuperscript{g}, Julie Makani\textsuperscript{g}, Guida Landoure\textsuperscript{i}, Leon Mutesa\textsuperscript{j}, Ghada El-Kamah\textsuperscript{k}, Amal Mohamed\textsuperscript{l}, Melanie Newport\textsuperscript{l}, Scott M. Williams\textsuperscript{m}, Michele Ramsay\textsuperscript{n}, and Victoria Nembaware\textsuperscript{a}

\textsuperscript{a}Division of Human Genetics, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Cape Town, Cape Town 7925, South Africa; \textsuperscript{b}McKusick-Nathans Institute and Department of Genetic Medicine, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Baltimore, MD 21205; \textsuperscript{c}Division of Molecular Biology and Human Genetics, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Stellenbosch University, Cape Town 7505, South Africa; \textsuperscript{d}South African Medical Research Council/Stellenbosch University Genomics of Brain Disorders Research Unit, Cape Town 7505, South Africa; \textsuperscript{e}Division of Human Genetics, Faculty of Medicine, Pharmacy and Odontology, University Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar P. O. Box 5005, Senegal; \textsuperscript{f}National Human Genome Research Institute, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, MD 20892; \textsuperscript{g}Department of Haematology and Blood Transfusion, School of Medicine, MUHAS, Dar es Salaam P. O. Box 65001, Tanzania; \textsuperscript{h}Department of Research and Training, Shree Hindu Mandal Hospital, Dar es Salaam P. O. Box 581, Tanzania; \textsuperscript{i}Hôpital du point G, University of Bamako, Bamako P. O. Box 333, Mali; \textsuperscript{j}Center for Human Genetics, College of Medicine and Health Sciences, University of Rwanda, Kigali P. O. Box 4285, Rwanda; \textsuperscript{k}Human Genetics and Genome Research Institute, National Research Centre, Cairo, Egypt; \textsuperscript{l}Brighton & Sussex Centre for Global Health Research, Brighton and Sussex Medical School, University of Sussex, Sussex, BN1 9RH, UK; \textsuperscript{m}Department of Population and Quantitative Health Sciences, Institute of Computational Biology, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, 44106 OH; \textsuperscript{n}Sydney Brenner Institute for Molecular Bioscience, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, Private Bag 3, Wits 2050, South Africa

**ABSTRACT** The African Society of Human Genetics (AfSHG) was formed to provide a forum for human genetics and genomics scientists in Africa to interact, network, and collaborate. This is critical to facilitate development of solutions to the public health burden of many rare and common diseases across the continent. AfSHG fully supports the Black Lives Matter movement, which is dedicated to fighting racism and ensuring that society values the lives and humanity of Black people. The AfSHG would like to add its “voice” to the public outcry against racism sparked by George Floyd’s death and to declare its commitment to ensuring that injustice and systematic racism, as well as abuse and exploitation of Africans and their biological material, are no longer tolerated. This is particularly relevant now as African genomic variation is poised to make significant contributions across several disciplines including ancestry, personalized medicine, and novel drug discovery. “Black Lives Matter and Black Research Matters” is AfSHG’s call for the global community to support halting, and reversing, the perpetuation of exploitation of African people through neocolonial malpractices in genonomic research. We also propose five key ways to curb racism in science, so that we can move forward together, with a common humanity, collectively embracing scientific endeavors.

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The authors are members, and Ambroise Wonkam is president, of the African Society of Human Genetics.

*Address correspondence to: Ambroise Wonkam (awonkam1@jmhi.edu).

Abbreviations used: AfSHG, The African Society of Human Genetics; GWAS, Genome-Wide Association Studies; H3Africa, Human Heredity and Health in Africa Consortium; NIH, National Institutes of Health; WHO, World Health Organization.

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The African Society of Human Genetics (AFSHG; https://www.afshg.org/) was established in 2003 after consultation with African and international researchers (Rotimi, 2004). AFSHG's goals are focused on education, networking, collaborations, and building capacity to undertake human genetics research in Africa. In addition to individual members from Africa and the diaspora, as well as non-African scientists with an interest in African genomic research, AFSHG is made up of member societies from Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Mali, Morocco, Rwanda, Senegal, South Africa, and Tanzania. The members meet annually and host conferences to promote career development of young investigators and support African-led research in genomics and related fields. While AFSHG has influenced the research agenda in Africa, by and for Africans, the society acknowledges that its endeavor does not occur in a vacuum and thus it affirms the recent global outcry against racism sparked by George Floyd's May 2020 death in the United States (Medicine and medical science, 2020). Therefore, AFSHG is committed to addressing injustice and systematic racism affecting people of African ancestry, and minority groups globally, in science and society at large.

Modern apologists for colonialism and imperialism, despite their perpetuation of racism, tend to find justification in the moral duty to distribute “the gracious gift of Science” from the West. Also, sadly, the African continent has a long-standing legacy of “helicopter research” and exploitation where overseas researchers collect and ship African biological samples out of the continent with no direct benefit to the study participants or to African researchers. As an example, in 2011 most published research using DNA samples collected in Cameroon from Cameroonians included no African institutions or authors and largely lacked approvals from African ethics review boards (Wonkam et al., 2011). Such activities perpetuate scientific imperialism, sometimes in the guise of tackling global public health emergencies including the collection and removal of Ebola samples from the continent (Schroeder et al., 2018). Furthermore, current genomic research on the African continent is largely defined by external funding and research agendas that may not reflect the current needs of the continent (Hedt-Gauthier et al., 2019). Additionally, the lack of local opportunities, funding, mentorship, and investment in research has led to a “brain drain” when African researchers are enticed out of the continent to pursue careers in more affluent parts of the world. “I can’t breathe…” is a sentiment shared by numerous young Africans who, stifled by a lack of prospects, are forced to leave the continent. Those who remain are subjected to prejudices, such as limited access to external funding sources (Ginther et al., 2011) and limited opportunities to publish in major international journals due to “editorial and reviewer racism” (where manuscripts could be rejected based on the affiliation of the authors and not always on the quality of the science).

AFSHG strongly condemns these practices and supports the need to dismantle colonial behaviors that have plagued the African continent for too long, resulting in exploitation of African peoples and their biological material. We recognize that, following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, waves of anti-racism statements have been published by funding agencies, publishers, scientific journals, and academic institutions in support of eliminating racism in science. However, this has not often been followed by measurable actions. Therefore, some solutions are put forward here as a way to start these discussions in the broader research community. First and foremost, what is urgently needed is an equitable and ethical intercontinental collaboration framework. This is, of course, possible only with appropriate support from national and international funders, African governments, private charities, and industry. In fact, a mutually beneficial partnership between the AFSHG, the National Institutes of Health (NIH), and Wellcome led to the establishment of the Human Heredity and Health in Africa Consortium (H3Africa) (Rotimi et al., 2014). H3Africa and other similar initiatives prove that creating opportunities reveals talents and could potentially contribute to decreasing the stigma and prejudice endured by both Africans on the continent and those in the diaspora largely as a consequence of Africa’s colonial and slavery legacy. Currently, H3Africa supports more than 50 African-led projects that are addressing diseases relevant to Africa but that are often disregarded by the global research community (Rotimi et al., 2014). Importantly, such initiatives have a high likelihood of reversing the limited representation of African genomic data in public databases, which is a travesty because it is widely acknowledged that public availability of large-scale African data will accelerate understanding of African genomes and potentially contribute to better health not only for Africans but for all global populations (Choudhury et al., 2020). Such data sharing should go hand in hand with plans to promote benefits to participating communities (Ramsay, 2022).

Moreover, commercialization of genomic research products needs appropriate regulation now more than ever as African genomes are likely to become central to major health-related discoveries (Wonkam et al., 2022). Hastiness to once more exploit this unique resource has contributed to legal challenges for an “African” Genome-Wide Association Studies (GWAS) DNA chip that was developed by a company that lacked sufficient engagement with key stakeholders (Stokstad, 2019). Africans are not leading the selection of Africa’s research agendas. Therefore, neoimperialism and racism in science, which could divide an already fragile African scientific community, should be prevented as they could derail African-led research efforts (Nordling, 2014). We acknowledge that

**BOX 1: Five key points toward addressing, racism and exploitation in science/genomics in Africa.**

- Framework for equitable access to opportunities for African and all researchers, including editorial and publishing guidelines, adopted by national and international funding agencies, publishers, African governments, and international organizations such as the WHO, private charities, and industry.
- Promotion and implementation through the African Union of African-led and African-funded research in human genetics to:
  - Defeat helicopter/imperialistic research
  - Halt unethical research practices
  - Promotion of community engagement and benefit sharing
- Fostering pan-African academic mobility and research networks through supporting young investigators for professional societies such as AFSHG and establishing diplomatic passports for scientists.
- Developing processes for deconstructing and debating the decolonization of science, for example, with the inclusion in academic curricula the contributions of African and all civilizations in science.
- Developing paths for recognition of malpractices of the past and present by global institutions and processes for repairing the harm caused, including returning scientific artifacts “stolen” from Africa during colonial times.
Ambroise Wonkam is a professor of genetic medicine and the director of the McKusick-Nathans Institute and the Department of Genetic Medicine, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Baltimore, Maryland. He is also director of GeneMAP (Genetic Medicine of African Populations) at the Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Cape Town, South Africa.

After Medical Doctor training from the Faculty of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences, University of Yaoundé (Cameroon), he completed a thesis in medicine/medical sciences at the University of Geneva (Switzerland) and a PhD in human genetics (University of Cape Town, South Africa). He also trained as a medical geneticist at the University of Geneva (Switzerland). He subsequently has practiced medical genetics in both European and African contexts.

His research interests are reflected in more than 150 peer-reviewed publications. His research focuses on 1) Genomics modifiers of sickle cell disease (SCD); 2) Genetics of hearing loss, and 3) Ethical and educational issues in human genetics in Africa. Over the past 10 years, Prof. Wonkam has successfully led numerous NIH- and Wellcome Trust-funded projects, accounting for about 20 million USD. His research projects span several countries across Africa (Tanzania, Cameroon, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Uganda, Mali, Sudan, Rwanda, and Ghana).

Prof. Wonkam is the president of the African Society of Human Genetics, the chair of the steering committee of H3Africa, a board member of the International Federation of Human Genetics Societies, a steering committee member of the Global Genetic Medicine Collaborative (G2MC), and a faculty scholar of the Human Genome Organization (HUGO). Furthermore, he is an associate editor of the American Journal of Human Genetics, the American Journal of Medical Genetics, and the Journal of Community Genetics, academic editor of PLoS One, and a member of the editorial board of Human Genetics.

He was awarded the 2003 Denber-Pinard Prize for the best thesis from the Faculty of Medicine, University of Geneva, Switzerland, won the very competitive Clinical Genetics Society International Award for 2014 from the British Society of Genetic Medicine, the 2021 Alan Pifer Award from University of Cape Town, and the 2011 MRC South Africa Gold Scientific Merit Award for the excellence of his research.

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