

June 12, 2020

Dear Faculty, Staff, Fellows, Residents and Students,

Amid all of the outrage of the past two weeks, I received a letter from Sarah England, a professor in the Department of Obstetrics & Gynecology. Her letter was very painful to read and brought tears to my eyes. She wrote to me about her wishes for Chinwendu Amazu, an MD PhD student who had just defended her thesis after four years in Sarah's lab. She wrote about the thesis defense with a mixture of pride and hope but also despair that this student will have many of the same experiences Sarah herself has faced as a Black female scientist on this campus.

She wrote:

I hope her colleagues will not tell her they are racially profiling her.

I hope she is not rendered invisible and that she is granted credit for initiatives she conceived and started.

I hope she is not told she was hired because she is Black.

I hope that people recognize her for her talents outside of diversity efforts.

I hope that she is not stopped by security when trying to get to the lab and told her badge does not work.

I hope that no one tells her she is just being "sensitive" when she brings up a racist incident.

I hope that when she reports discrimination to Human Resources, that someone actually calls her back to follow up.

I hope that when someone Black is suffering in the halls of our hospital, she does not watch others walk by them before she stops to help.

I hope that her institutional colleagues and leaders understand that her path to academic success is full of obstacles that she will have to overcome.

I know it was not easy for Sarah to send this to me and, in truth, any response seems inadequate. But I am sharing her words with all of you, with her permission, because together we must find a way forward. I have heard from several of our faculty, house staff, students and staff about similar

experiences. They hope for better but fear that things will not change, that we will not do the hard work needed here in our own institution. As a leader, I am struggling mightily in this moment. I know that being a leader means that I must own the problems that Sarah describes and that the journey to improve our culture will take very hard work with the school's leadership team and department heads. We will need to listen to and internalize what our Black colleagues tell us, and we will need to take on the challenge of overcoming a deep-seated and long-standing white supremacy culture.

Last week we welcomed our new head of the Department of Obstetrics & Gynecology, Dr. Dineo Khabele. Dr. Khabele shared with me a powerful letter she sent to faculty in her department on her first day on the job. In it she outlined all of the extraordinary challenges facing the department in these turbulent times, addressing the loss of life and livelihood wrought by COVID-19, the brutal deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, and the unrest that has followed, as well as more local and personal devastation. One passage, however, will stay with me for a long time. Dr. Khabele wrote: "Yet somehow while we grieve, we find ourselves moving forward. How? I really don't have good answers for anyone else. For me, I know that in part my grief fuels my core value to make a difference – to give back and to pay it forward."

In this moment, I am motivated by Dr. Khabele's description of moving forward in grief. I am committed to changing our culture through new and unprecedented action, and by intensifying efforts that are already underway. We have so much work to do in our own institution to ensure that *everyone* thrives and we will soon be discussing plans for moving forward as a Washington University School of Medicine community. I am thankful for the diversity of voices I am hearing, and we will continue to need all of them to reach the full potential of our collective talents. We are a long way from justice but each step we take together gets us closer to where we need to be.

Sincerely,

David H. Perlmutter, MD
Executive Vice Chancellor for Medical Affairs and Dean