

PUBLIC POLICY AND ADVOCACY
Legislative Update

Renewed Attention to Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities

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In March, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) released the land mark report, *Unequal Treatment: Confronting Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Health Care*, which was developed under the leadership of APA members **Brian D. Smedley, PhD**, and **Adrienne Stith, PhD**, who served as Study Director and Program Officer, respectively. The report found that racial and ethnic minorities tend to receive a lower quality of healthcare than non-minorities, even when access-related factors, such as insurance status and income, are controlled. The sources of these disparities are complex, rooted in historic and contemporary inequities, and involve many participants at several levels, including health systems, their administrative and bureaucratic processes, utilization managers, healthcare professionals, and patients. Consistent with their charge, the study committee focused part of its analysis on the clinical encounter itself, and found evidence that stereotyping, biases, and uncertainty on the part of healthcare providers can all contribute to unequal treatment. The conditions in which many clinical encounters take place – characterized by time constraints, cognitive complexity, and cost containment pressures – may enhance the likelihood that these processes will result in the delivery of care poorly matched to minority patients' needs.

Furthermore, minorities may experience a range of other barriers to accessing care, even when insured at the same level as whites, including barriers of language, geography, and cultural familiarity. You can access the IOM report at <http://www.nap.edu> or by calling (800) 624-6242.

APA's Public Policy Office (PPO) is working to promote the inclusion of some of the report's key recommendations into the appropriations bill for the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). These include the recommendations to conduct further research at the National Institutes of Health to identify sources of racial and ethnic disparities, assess promising intervention strategies, and examine ethical issues and other barriers to eliminating disparities.

On a related front, PPO staff served on the planning committee for the Congressional Black Caucus' Spring Health Braintrust to examine the status and progress of the DHHS initiative to eliminate racial and ethnic health disparities, which was held in April on Capitol Hill. APA members **Brian D. Smedley, PhD**, presented on the IOM report, and **Vickie Mays, PhD**, Chairperson of the Subcommittee on Populations, National Committee on Vital and Health Statistics, presented on the charge of her Subcommittee. Dr. Mays reported that her Subcommittee contends that in order for the DHHS to fulfill its role as a leader in the effort to eliminate health disparities, the current knowledge base needs to be expanded in order to understand the occurrence and full impact of circumstances that lead to disparities across the entire population.