

Announcer:

In this episode of Tim Talk, Tim and Dr. Douglas MacGregor discuss the role of being an ally to diversity.

Tim Dentry:

Thank you for joining us for Tim Talk. I'm Tim Dentry, president and CEO of Northern Light Health. We are fortunate to have people in our healthcare system who are willing to help us explore issues of racial, social and medical justice. Our goal in this podcast is to improve upon our culture of inclusion, through thoughtful and meaningful conversations with people with diverse viewpoints. This podcast is one way that we hope to advance that concept. I am joined now by Dr. Douglas MacGregor, a pediatrician with Northern Light Maine Coast Hospital in Ellsworth. Thank you for joining me here today and please call me Tim. And may I call you Doug?

Dr. Douglas MacGregor:

Absolutely.

Tim Dentry:

Great.

Dr. Douglas MacGregor:

Tim, thank you for inviting me to participate this. It's been a very thought provoking process for me to prepare for the talk.

Tim Dentry:

Thank you so much, Doug. Over the last month or so, you shared with me your personal experience and perspective on racial justice. As the medical staff president of Northern Light Maine Coast Hospital, you distributed a statement to the medical staff addressing, "What should or can I, or we, do about racism?" You wrote, and I quote, "I am white and was born into privilege. I can't reverse that. And even if I wanted to or tried to, it wouldn't work. I can, however, choose not to ignore racism in myself or others. I can challenge myself to continue to inspect and change my own subtle or not so subtle failings." So, Doug, my first question is what were you hoping to achieve by distributing that amazing letter and what has been the response and what is next for you in this journey?

Dr. Douglas MacGregor:

Thank you, Tim. When I think back on it, I will first confess that I felt nervousness about writing it and that in itself shouldn't be. Anyone who wants to stand up and talk against racism, there shouldn't be anything to hold that person back. Before addressing what I hoped to achieve, I'd like to talk a little bit about what motivated me. And clearly what motivated me were the incredible changes that were happening in our country. I don't think there's been a time before when cell phones have been so important to capture events and then motivate broad sections of our people.

Dr. Douglas MacGregor:

The things that all of us have seen involving the killing of people by police on cell phones has been profound. I would like to say that I don't think that is a common event. I think that police across the board, and by and large, have integrity and carry out a very difficult job; however, I think it's also clear, at least to me, that there has been way too many instances of people of color being targeted by police.

And more importantly, the systems that they work in have supported those police officers, which by the very definition is racism.

Dr. Douglas MacGregor:

Racism can be defined and should be defined as a systemic approach of suppressing the rights of people. So as I went through the last year, watching these things, I became more and more motivated. Well, I guess I would just leave it at that; motivated. My heart was being broken. I felt what I was witnessing was wrong, so that's what motivated me to write a letter. What I hope to impact or change by writing that letter is probably just the point of somebody in my position taking a stand, becoming a witness to what's going on and being a vocal part of a community who will speak back against racism.

Dr. Douglas MacGregor:

The response I got? I got probably six emails in response and every one of those was very supportive of the stand I took. I expected to hear more, whether pro or con, but I also recognized that our staff is incredibly busy and I, myself, try really hard not to open up too many big letters to read, because it takes so long. I've had other responses though that have come to me as I walk through the hospital, where I might say is I did to a nurse early this morning, I made some comment about things that are happening in the news today, and she said, "Oh, by the way, I found your letter printed on a desk. I read it. It was incredible." So this was an example of how, if I step a little bit out of my usual role and start a conversation, very simple, very innocent, it's more often than not that another person will use that opening to begin a conversation with me about racial justice.

Dr. Douglas MacGregor:

And what's next for me? I'll say that my process started with this probably most definitively about two years ago when I began to read, and I have read book after book about the impact of racism on our society, about the roots of racism and about people pushing back. I continue to expect that. Another thing that I will do, I'm going to mention right now that the American Academy of Pediatrics came out with a policy about racism a year ago. And in their policy statement, three things are, to me, quite profound. One is that they define racism as a socially transmissible disease. They then mark and document all of the negative impacts on the health of people. And they talk about the people who are the targets of a racism. They talk about people who are witnesses and bystanders to racism, and they talk about people who hold racism deep in their heart and the negative impact that occurs.

Dr. Douglas MacGregor:

They also talk about solutions. And one of the solutions is for pediatricians specifically to create bridges with other groups of people, to combat racism. And I intend to do that.

Tim Dentry:

Thank you very much for that answer. For my second question, let me start with a little explanation. I draw an analogy with this movement that's going on right now to the Patient Safety Movement across the country and the world, gaining momentum's when storytelling was added to the conversation. Patient stories got more personal and got the attention of those in denial that safety was a problem in healthcare. So my second question to you is, what story would you like to tell about racial, social and medical injustices that have changed the way you look at things and conduct yourself?

Dr. Douglas MacGregor:

Thank you, Tim. I'll precede or begin talking about stories by mentioning the book by, I think her name is Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility*. In that book, two of her points are that one, all white people, to a degree, are racist. The reason for that is that we are born into a white privileged society. It would be impossible to not adopt many of the premises. She goes on to say that some people have a little racism, some people have a lot. Another point she makes is that denying racism is one of the biggest challenges we face to overcome it.

Dr. Douglas MacGregor:

So having said that my two stories are as follows. The first one is about myself. I'm white. I've never considered myself a racist. When I heard about the Republican convention or rally that was to occur in Tucson, Oklahoma, I believe, was the first time I had heard of Juneteenth. I had no idea about the significance; I then learned about it. In learning about it, I also heard about the massacre that had occurred of black individuals at the so-called Black Wall Street in that area. As any normal person should be, I was horrified about what I read.

Dr. Douglas MacGregor:

I then heard a number of individuals, black individuals, suggesting or stating or calling for Juneteenth to become a federal holiday. I felt inside myself, a little abrupt change that said something like, "Well, if they get another holiday, I want another holiday too." At that point, I realized that Robin DiAngelo was right; there inside of me was an unwelcome example of my white privilege. So with that, I find that one of the challenges for all of us and for me, is to continue to inspect my own feelings and my own thoughts, to accept the fact that racism does occur even where we don't expect it and to embrace opportunities, to look at ourselves, to make that change.

Dr. Douglas MacGregor:

The second example that I'm going to give of this very same thing, is not more than two days ago, the American Academy of Pediatrics published an apology for having been racist. They go on to say that back in the thirties, the late thirties, they refused entry to the Society by black doctors. And this went on for a while. And now it's many, many years later where the current administration of the American Academy of Pediatrics can no longer be quiet about their past history. Make no mistake, that's not a present practice, but the AAP felt that it was important to recognize it, acknowledge it, call it for what it was and in so doing, call out for a continued movement forward.

Dr. Douglas MacGregor:

Now, one more thing as a story, if you will. I think part of the problem of racism, if not the fundamental problem of racism, is that people who are white believe that people who are black or brown are in some way inferior. Part of my past experience is that I worked for 14 years as a pediatric oncologist at NYU Bellevue in the heart of New York City. During that time, a wonderful group of professionals and myself treated all comers. And because we were at the heart of New York city, at the heart of the health and hospital corporation, most of the patients that I treated were of color; black, brown, or otherwise, and many of them were extremely poor. Many of them came from all around the world.

Dr. Douglas MacGregor:

During those 14 years, I saw people of all colors, do everything that they could to save the life of their child. They would sell their house. They would leave their homes, their families. They would suffer. And the children that I treated of all colors were equally as brave as each other. If there is one thing that that

experience taught me is that under the surface of our skin, we are equally courageous, brave, and dignified. So Tim, those are my three stories.

Tim Dentry:

Thank you so much for those insightful stories. Now, Doug, what questions can I answer for you?

Dr. Douglas MacGregor:

Tim, I have a couple of questions for you. The first one is that, as I said earlier, a significant block to advancing racial equity is a tendency on the part of many white people to deny that a racial problem exists in our town or our community. How can Northern Light Health respond to this?

Tim Dentry:

Thank you. Great question. Well, first we can set a tone of dialogue and self-reflection. And that's what I hear from you. That's what I've heard from so many of our other podcast partners, as we have put this program together, is there's a great extent of self-examination, self-reflection self-learning, seeking to understand more. And I think what we can absolutely do is set a tone of it's not only a safe organization in which to express your viewpoints, but it's encouraged so that we have a tone, we have a culture, of our organization of dialogue and self-reflection. It's got to start with that cultural first step that it's okay and we want to hear from each other, we want to talk, we want to listen and learn.

Tim Dentry:

Second, put it in terms of stories. I think it's fabulous that you've been doing this for two years. You've been reading this, as you said, reading these kinds of really now very famous books. They're on the top seller list. Maybe they have been there for the last couple of years. I will be one of the first to admit I didn't pick up one read. I thought I was pretty well enlightened. And now I am reading more. Now I am talking more. Now I am engaged more, and self-reflecting more. I've learned so much from so many of our colleagues on their own personal stories, so putting it in that kind of human terms like you just did, that was so profound in your experience as a practicing pediatrician in New York City. That is profound. So sharing stories.

Tim Dentry:

Third, and it goes part and parcel with the first two, but really make sure that we create a nonpunitive, nonjudgmental, non-polarizing, but uniting, dialogue, and framework and culture. Because the saddest thing to me to see, it's not that we're talking about all these things. It's great. It's about how dis-unifying it can be. And if anything, it compounds poor relations and lack of trust and disgruntledness and that kind of thing, which we can avoid that. The outcome of all this great potential of raising these issues and talking about it, it doesn't have to go to an uglier place. Let's take it to a healthier place.

Tim Dentry:

And that takes me to my fourth point. And that is for me, and especially as what I've learned, and I stated this on other podcasts, one of the great benefits of being the CEO is more than any other person, you can have a true impact on the culture of this organization, of Northern Light Health and with our 12,000 colleagues, and then I multiply that times three because that's their families. So our family of Northern Light and their families, that's one big family. I am trying to influence, with the role that I now

have, in our positive culture, our nonpunitive culture, our way of our uniting culture, so that these are healthy topics to discuss and not painful topics.

Tim Dentry:

One of the very first things I went on record at saying, it was early on, so long ago in April 2020, but way back then I remember saying, "I hope I feel uncomfortable for a long time in talking about this." And I meant that in a healthy way, not a causing pain or feeling pain or feeling guilty or feeling what have you, but I want to feel uncomfortable and not feel that we don't need to talk about this. I want to help everyone feel that this is such a positive, open-minded, uniting organization that we're going to learn and talk about all these things together.

Dr. Douglas MacGregor:

I have another question for you. Are you ready? A mother recently shared with me that when her baby was born, one of the nurses in the delivery room, exclaimed, "I just love black babies." Although I am sure this was well-intentioned, white people see the world through their eyes and their experiences. People of color see the world through their collective experiences; one that's very different from that of white people. How can employees at Northern Light Health gain a better understanding of all the people we serve and appreciate both the commonalities as well as the differences in order to avoid comments like I just stated?

Tim Dentry:

First, I wonder if this story that you just shared would have even come out to you had you not created the space for dialogue on race and social justice. Yeah? So I love it when I hear that, as tough as that kind of a comment and story is to really absorb and to respond to. But let's talk about those kinds of things. So creating that space for dialogue is the most important thing that we can do. And again, I'm learning that as CEO, I can personally open a lot of doors, I'm opening up this door on racial and social and medical justice, and I'm committed to stay in the course of keeping that door open. But that can only go so far. Imagine if each and every one of our 12,000 plus colleagues created this space, their own space, that then expanded into others and self learn and truly listen to one another. So those are the two key points.

Tim Dentry:

We have a lot of other irons in the fire of making sure that we are then backing that up with educational programs. I have staff that send me messages all the time saying, "Here's something to add to the reading list." So we're actually getting a book club together, and discussion groups. We have a council that I talked about at the last couple of podcasts, and it's an advisory council to me that represents many from across our organization on diversity to address just these issues.

Tim Dentry:

I'm very excited that this week, as an example, we're just starting to talk about medical justice issues. I love the fact that we can be in the lead on that in the state of Maine. Our new chief quality officer, Navneet Marwaha, Dr. Marwaha just started and I let her know that's one of our first orders of business is et's be data driven, let's understand this and let's be a leader on the lines of medical justice issues. So there's so many great things that we can do to back that up, as you say, and it starts with individual responsibility, and that's the space that we would like to create.

This transcript was exported on Apr 11, 2022 - view latest version [here](#).

Dr. Douglas MacGregor:

Thank you, Tim.

Tim Dentry:

That will wrap up this episode of Tim Talk. Dr. MacGregor, thank you for joining me here to continue this conversation.

Dr. Douglas MacGregor:

Thank you for the invitation. It has been a pleasure.

Tim Dentry:

And thank you, our podcast listeners, as well. Until next time, I'm Tim Dentry, encouraging you to listen and act to promote our culture of caring, diversity and inclusion.

Announcer:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Tim Talk. If you enjoyed this podcast and would like to learn more about this subject, you can find additional information [@northernlighthealth.org/podcast](https://www.northernlighthealth.org/podcast). We welcome you to join us in two weeks when we'll begin our new series on social and medical justice for the LGBTQ+ community.