

Stay Away From Black Doctors

Is Racial Preference Unfair?

By Linda Chavez | Tuesday June 19 01:00 AM EDT

The American Medical Association meets this week in Chicago for its annual conference, and there will be plenty of controversial public policy issues on its agenda. But one issue you can bet the AMA won't talk about is what effect the widespread practice of admitting blacks and Hispanics to medical school with lower qualifications than their white and Asian counterparts is having on the medical profession.

By now, most Americans have gotten used to the idea that colleges and universities apply double standards when it comes to admitting black and Hispanic undergraduates — even if they don't like it very much. The assumption has been, however, that these students somehow catch up over the next four years and go on to be just as successful as their white and Asian peers. This notion was given a boost a few years ago when two influential former college presidents, William Bowen and Derek Bok, published the findings of a study on affirmative action, "The Shape of the River," in which they claimed that minority students who benefited from preferential admissions standards nonetheless went on to perform well, earning graduate degrees at higher numbers than might be expected.

What Bowen and Bok didn't say is that the same degree of racial preference being given to minority students at the undergraduate level applies to graduate schools, too, including medical schools. For the first time ever, we now have the hard numbers to prove that medical schools routinely give preference to less-qualified black (and sometimes Hispanic) applicants than to others.

The Center for Equal Opportunity (CEO), which I head, has been studying the issue of racial preferences in college admissions for the past six years. We've now turned our focus to medical schools and are in the process of gathering information on every public school of medicine in the country. So far, we've analyzed six medical schools, representing every geographic region of the country, and the pattern for medical schools is the same as it was for undergraduate institutions. Black and Hispanic students are being admitted to medical school with substantially lower college grades and test scores than whites or Asians.

If you're a black or, to a lesser degree, Hispanic applicant, your chances of being admitted to medical school are far greater than whites or Asians with the same college grades and Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) scores. At the University of Washington School of Medicine in 1997, the odds ratio of a black applicant being admitted over a white with the same grades and MCAT scores were nearly 30-to-1. At

the State University of New York, Brooklyn, the odds were nearly 23-to-1 in 1996 and were 9-to-1 in 1999. At the University of Maryland in 1999, they were 21-to-1, and at the University of Georgia in 1996, they were 19-to-1. At Michigan State University College of Human Medicine they were 12-to-1 in 1997 and 14-to-1 in 1999.

But more disturbing even than the finding that medical schools seem to be admitting less-qualified students on the basis of race and ethnicity is that many of these students can't pass their licensing exams, despite greater resources directed toward helping them than other students received. At every medical school CEO studied, substantially larger numbers of black students than whites either did not take or failed their initial licensing exams, and, in most instances, failed their subsequent licensing tests as well.

These higher failure rates don't just mean personal disappointment. Since medical education requires a huge allocation of resources — and at state schools, this usually means tax-payer funding — medical students who do not go on to become doctors are a poor investment. More than 3,500 white and Asian students were not admitted to the schools CEO studied, despite having better grades and test scores than black and Hispanic applicants who were given preferential treatment. Since grades and, in particular, MCAT scores are very good predictors of performance on the licensing exams, we know that a higher percentage of these students would have passed the exams if they had been admitted.

So, who wins? Certainly not the whites and Asians denied the opportunity to study medicine. But neither do the blacks and Hispanics who were admitted to medical school but could not survive there. And all of the rest of us — of all colors — suffer, too, from a shortage of qualified doctors.