

## SOM eNews August 2020

I am honoured to be able to introduce SOM's August newsletter. This year will stand out for a few reasons, the obvious one being the COVID-19 pandemic, but there is another important issue that I want to focus on. The Black Lives Matter protest has gained momentum, once again highlighting injustices and racial inequality in many parts of the world. But, some people may find it difficult to relate the specific issue of gun violence in America (which triggered the protests) to this country.

In the UK, we are not immune from structural racism and systemic inequality, which is why the movement has garnered support here. Many people think that racism is overt and obvious, hence they can be quick to discount it, but that is hardly ever the case. It is often subtle and implied, hard to discern or prove, which really is the key to its survival and prevalence in society. However, that does not mean that its impact is trivial or superficial. Having personally experienced racism, I can say that it can have a devastating impact on your very identity, leaving you feeling desperate, hopeless and paranoid. There is plenty of evidence of racism and disparity based on race in Medicine, whether it is to do with COVID-19 outcomes, referral rates of ethnic minority doctors to the GMC or lack of representation at leadership level. But there are still people who deny the very existence of racism and think that this does not happen around them.

The first step to address this issue is to ensure that it is acknowledged and discussed. It is not enough to not be racist personally or not discriminate against others, but we have to be anti-racist. This means that people, especially those in leadership positions, actively identify inequality within their organisations and do their best to address them. The voices of ethnic minority groups need to be heard at every level and there needs to be enough representation of ethnic minority groups at senior levels. It is not enough to have processes and systems in place to deal with discrimination and complaints - they have to be followed and refined if necessary. We are all aware of some companies tweeting their support for #BLM or BAME issues publicly but then have had individuals or employees calling them out for racist behaviour behind closed doors. We need to ensure that people are believed and supported when they stand up to discriminatory behaviour and companies don't just pay lip service to it.

I know it can be very uncomfortable to acknowledge our own privilege in this system and how it may have benefitted us. As a UK-born Asian, I am aware of certain privileges that I have been awarded as a result of my education in this country and familiarity with the systems and norms that govern it. But we all have a moral imperative to ensure that we build a society that offers equal opportunity. We should start by educating ourselves on the issue and the many ways it can present itself, discuss it openly and listen to people who have first-hand experience of it, so that we can start to do something about it. We need to challenge the status quo and look beyond specious justifications on why someone from an ethnic minority background cannot be recruited into a role or promoted into a leadership position or supported to develop further or given specific opportunities/benefits etc.

I am therefore proud to be a member of the SOM, who want to take an active part in combating racism and supporting equality and diversity within the workplace. SOM will be discussing these issues more deeply at its Board level, gathering information from members of ethnic minority groups on their experiences and from all members to identify how we can make a difference going forward.

I will leave you with a quote that I think is fitting in this context: *"If you are neutral in the face of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor"* **Desmond Tutu**

Dr Sheetal Chavda  
SOM Honorary Treasurer