Commentary: Message in a bottle

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The song “Message in a Bottle” by the legendary rock band The Police is a one about hope in the worst of times. The lyrics tell the story of someone sending out a message to find comfort, understanding, and strength in a hopeless situation. In that hopelessness, the world replied to the sender, saying that they were not alone in that battle and that they were all finding hope together.

In 2004, the Institute of Medicine published their report, “Ensuring Diversity in the Health-care Workforce,” in which the many benefits of a diverse workforce are reviewed. A diverse health care workforce is associated with improved access to care (particularly for racially and ethnically minoritized patients), improved satisfaction with care, improved patient/provider communication, improved health care outcomes, and better educational experiences for students and residents. Diversity fosters innovation, improves the quality of patient care, and decreases health disparities.

In the 2020 Women in Thoracic Surgery Update, a recent significant increase in the number of women certifying as an American Board of Thoracic Surgery diplomat was reported. Encouragingly, more women in cardiothoracic surgery (CTS) are also entering adult cardiac or congenital surgery practices. However, the gender diversity of CTS still lags behind that of all surgical subspecialties and, certainly, that of all clinical medicine.

In their study of the racial and ethnic diversity of CTS trainees, Hamzat and colleagues note that the percentage of Black and Hispanic trainees in CTS have essentially remained stagnant over the 10-year study period (2013-2022). The percentage of Black CTS trainees was 3.3% during the first 5 years of the study and 3.9% during the latter 5 years.

For Hispanic CTS trainees, it was 7% and 7.4%, respectively. Furthermore, the racial and ethnic diversity of CTS lags behind that of other surgical specialties as well as that of all clinical medicine. Lastly, the racial and ethnic diversity of CTS is woefully behind the diversity of the US population that we serve.

The US population is 51% female, 18% Hispanic, and 13% Black. Medical school matriculants are 49% female, 6% Hispanic, and 7% Black. Yet, CTS trainees are 24% female, 5% Hispanic, and 4% Black and CTS faculty are 17% female, 5% Hispanic, and 3% Black. Although the medical school pipeline for Hispanic and Black students still needs to improve, CTS is not capturing one-half of the female and Black graduates.

Ours is an amazing specialty, with a complexity in clinical practice that is unrivaled. We are privileged, as CTS surgeons, to care for a multifaceted and diverse patient population. We should reflect the diversity of our patients not only in skill and ability but also in the composition of our workforce. “I hope that someone gets my message in a bottle.”

References