

Mind the Gap: a clinical handbook of signs and symptoms in black and brown skin

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Malone Mukwende is a medical student, born in Zimbabwe and currently studying at St. George's University of London. His own experiences inspired him to develop 'Mind the Gap,' a clinical handbook of signs and symptoms in black and brown skin, relating to wound care, skin conditions and other illnesses. This vision came to life through a staff-student partnership at the university; Malone began work on the project in 2019 with two members of university staff, and the first edition is now complete.

'Growing up, I became aware of many stories from members of my community about misdiagnosis and an array of other problems with the healthcare system. I could openly see that confidence and satisfaction in health professionals (HCPs) was declining within the affected members of the community. My awareness originally came first-hand from being a member of the community and seeing the effect that this had on people.

Once I arrived at medical school, this played a significant role in motivating me to make a change for others who were being affected by the gap in medical teaching. White skin bias is ever-present in many of the textbooks we currently use. This means that many of the pictures and descriptors will apply to white skin; however, these do not always translate to darker skin.

It came as a surprise that many people were not aware of the difference in presentation that pigmented skin could make. This highlighted how subconsciously we can allow these problems to manifest, so that a gap in awareness almost becomes normal. Therefore, this highlighted the need for education: both to future HCPs to improve their future practice, and also to current HCPs to help unlearn some of the biases they may have unconsciously obtained.

Another major factor which contributed to the need for education around white skin bias comes from known statistics, such as black women being five times more likely to die during childbirth, and patients of a BAME background being more likely to be affected by COVID-19. These health

inequalities exist and it is important that we aim to reduce them. There is a plethora of reasons behind the health inequalities; however, some may exist due to the lack of teaching in darker skin.

MIND THE GAP

One of the most important aspects of the Mind the Gap project is to bring awareness to the problem. Many may not have been aware of this issue; however, it is imperative that, with awareness, steps are actively taken to address it. Increased awareness and education will help patients and improve outcomes in many ways.

If adopted in practice, Mind the Gap will help to increase patient satisfaction, confidence and trust in HCPs. The patient experience will be improved by being able to trust that their HCP has awareness and knows what is going on with them. Increased awareness and trust between HCPs and patients will ultimately improve outcomes.

The accessibility of the work will help patients directly, as they too will be able to become informed about the condition they have and how it should appear on their skin. Currently patients have to use white skin as a reference point, which may act as a barrier to self-care and engaging with their own treatment.

WOUND CARE

It is important to be able to identify how signs and symptoms will present in different skin tones. Therefore, it is also important to know how different wounds and skin conditions will appear.

Another important aspect of wound care is how we describe the wounds. We need to start to become aware that certain descriptors are not always applicable for darker skins. It is important that we start to educate ourselves to ensure that the patient care isn't compromised. Resources such as Mind the Gap will aid in doing so.'

Full publication of Mind the Gap is forthcoming. Follow Malone on Twitter (@malone_mk) for more updates or connect on LinkedIn. 