

Renowned physician eyes end to inequities

By Vincent T. Davis

STAFF WRITER

Dr. Wayne J. Riley hasn't forgotten the hard years when African American physicians, including his own father, Dr. Emile Edward Riley, struggled to establish medical practices in the face of discrimination.

"I never, ever take for granted what these men and women who came before us had to endure," said Riley, president of the SUNY Downstate Health Sciences University in Brooklyn, the largest of four academic medical centers in the State University of New York. "They did more than endure; they persisted."

Now, Riley wants to end another legacy of that era — health disparities affecting Black and Hispanic Americans.

During the pandemic years of 2020 and 2021, Riley said, Black women had the highest rate of pregnancy-related deaths among all ethnic groups.

He said that for years, people have asked what Martin Luther

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RILEY

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King Jr. would think of the state of society today. On the screen behind him was a quotation by the late civil rights leader: "Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health care is the most shocking and inhuman."

Riley said he would amend the word "inhuman" to "inhumane."

Riley made his remarks recently as keynote speaker at the 20th anniversary Frank Bryant Jr. Memorial Distinguished Lecture at UT Health San Antonio.

Bryant, who died in 1999, was a San Antonio physician revered for his commitment to medically underserved communities on the East Side. He was a pioneer: one of the first Black students to attend the University of Texas Medical Branch in Gal-

veston and the first Black president of the Bexar County Medical Society.

He co-founded and was the first medical director of the Ella Austin Health Clinic on the East Side. He co-developed the East San Antonio Medical Center and was a clinical professor at UT Health San Antonio.

The Texas Medical Foundation established the lecture series in 2002 to honor Bryant.

Riley called Bryant "an exemplar of persistence to contribute to the health of all."

"He wasn't just about the Black folks on the East Side of San Antonio," Riley told the audience in the Holly Auditorium at UT Health. "He was for all San Antonians. He is what we get up every morning to do, create more healers like Frank Bryant."

Riley is a pathbreaker in his own right. A New



Courtesy Photo/Photo courtesy of UT Health San Antonio

Dr. Wayne Riley talks with medical students after his keynote speech at the 20th anniversary Frank Bryant Jr. Memorial Distinguished Lecture.

Orleans native, he earned his medical degree from Morehouse School of Medicine in Atlanta and completed a residency in internal medicine at Baylor College of Medicine. He went to become a vice president and vice-dean at Baylor and was later named president and CEO

of Meharry Medical College in Nashville, a historically black institution and his father's alma mater.

He's a former chair of the National Institutes of Health's National Advisory Council on Minority Health and Health Disparities.

"(He was) an exemplar of persistence to contribute to the health of all."

Dr. Wayne Riley, on Frank Bryant Jr.

Riley said Texas still struggles with inequities that existed when Bryant was practicing medicine. According to a Commonwealth Fund report, Texas ranks in the second quartile for state health system performance among white residents and in the bottom quartile for Blacks and Hispanics. Almost 25 percent of Blacks and Hispanics surveyed said they weren't in good health, compared to 16 percent of whites.

Riley said there has been progress. He lauded the Affordable Care Act, signed into law by President Barack Obama in 2010 and often referred to as Obamacare.

"This landmark piece of legislation is second to LBJ (President Lyndon B. Johnson) passing Medicare and Medicaid," Riley said.

He said that during the 2023 open enrollment period for Obamacare, 16.4 million people selected or re-enrolled in government and state marketplaces established under the law.

But Riley noted that Texas is one of 10 states that has refused to expand Medicaid coverage with federal support under the Affordable Care Act, "leaving \$15 billion on the table."

"This is an impediment to addressing the issue in Texas," Riley said. "That number is chilling."

Dr. Ruth Berggren, director of the UT Health San Antonio Center for Medical Humanities and Ethics, said there's confusion about the meaning of the term health equity.

"Equity is the perspective of how can we help everyone have the best possible outcome," Berggren said. "Some people are going to need more input than other people. That is the difference between equity and equality. I think it's unfortunate that wrong meanings get assigned to words that are simply trying to convey what fundamentally is a value that is common to all of us."

She said earlier in the day, Riley met with medical students for an hour and a half and shared stories from his early years of training.

"That was so encouraging for our students," Berggren said. "I believe they could see themselves evolving into a physician like Dr. Wayne Riley and a leader."

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