

ATTN: HAMILTON CITY COUNCIL

5.4

RE: Letter of Support – Motion to Amend Hamilton’s Board of Health

5 April 2023

Our social identities, the amount of money in our bank-accounts, and the income our parents had when we were born, drastically impact our health. The COVID pandemic highlighted known and avoidable inequities in access and healthcare outcomes that disproportionately impact Black, Indigenous, and racialized people. Striving for a more equitable world while ignoring structural or institutional change is like trying to survive a fire by barricading yourself in the room the flames have yet to reach, but not extinguishing the flames. Structural inequities necessitate structural changes.

In March 2021, community representatives, health care providers and physicians delegated to Hamilton’s Board of Health, sharing their expertise, lived experiences, and recommendations to help improve the board's structure. A system where elected officials with a singular physician (who do not collectively represent the demographics of the communities they serve) decide the fate of our communities is a system designed to fail diverse and marginalized communities. These representatives provided data on restructures that had occurred in other cities which included community members and health care providers on their Boards of Health.

As two racialized physicians living or working in Hamilton, we share our dreams of a better Hamilton.

Dr. Johnson’s lived experience:

I am a pediatrician and Adolescent Medicine Specialist, compelled to raise my voice as a Black woman raising two Black sons in the GTA and who has been working exclusively in the city of Hamilton for the past 17 years.

I realize that being a medical doctor confers a certain amount of power and privilege. But my MD does not immunize me against systemic racism and discrimination. When I walk the streets, enter a hospital, encounter a police officer, walk into a principal's office, a court room or city hall, I enter that situation with fear and dread based on my own lived experience and the well documented narrative of Blackness in North America, whereby my knowledge and skills as an experienced physician can instantly evaporate in the face of white women’s tears. Any discourse from me, no matter how measured, risks being portrayed and responded to as an unwarranted attack. My presence: experienced as an invasion. My opinion: uppity. Even in spaces supposedly designed to help. Biases about me, Black, Indigenous, and racialized people can cause premature death. Racism killed Joyce Eshaquan and Murray Sinclair. That they had treatable medical conditions irrelevant to their outcomes.

Dr. Menezes' lived experience:

As a racialized physician and researcher, my work focuses on studying how our racial identities shape how much we can achieve in our society. Healthcare is far from race-neutral: Our political and health structures have, and continue to be, shaped by our Colonial history. Evidenced by the unshakable fear I feel when accompanying family members to health appointments, the anxiety and mistrust we, our families, and our communities face when entering a health care system designed by, and for white Canadians. As the COVID pandemic unfolded, we watched as our racialized communities were villainized, and racialized people disproportionately died.

Our health is shaped by so much more than our biology. Rather, our health results from complex interactions between our biology, politics, socioeconomic status, and our experiences with the healthcare system. Improving access to healthcare and increasing trust in such a system cannot be done without being informed by the lived experiences of our community members.

The practice of electing politicians and our governmental representatives form the structure of the social institution of the communities we live in. Far from an actual, tangible, ivory tower, social institutions are the set of unsaid rules that all members of society follow. The power they wield over the population is drawn from the fact that we all fall in line without question, because this is what we've always done. But when we break down these powerful systems and structures in our society to this simple fact, we can see just how powerful each and every one of our individual actions are in affecting societal change. All you have to do is dare to disrupt the status quo.

So Hamilton's Board of Health has only ever been made up of elected members of council. But it doesn't have to be. On what grounds can spending \$50,000 on a consultation to obtain this same information be justified? We ask each and every Hamiltonian: when it comes to the people deciding on the fate of the health and lives of you, your families, loved ones, and communities, why is City Council even debating having representatives who are qualified to understand how these actions will impact us?

Jointly:

As racialized individuals, we learn to walk a tightrope delicately balancing between the acuity of our life saving demands and how to articulate them in a way that people will not only hear, but recognize our professional qualifications to make recommendations based on decades of specialized study. We will continue to delegate to city council to collaborate in building a new system that will serve every member of our community. After all, there are lives depending on it.

Sincerely,



Natasha Johnson, MD, FAAP, FRCPC



Anjali Menezes, MBBS, MClined, CCFP