NHS RACE & HEALTH OBSERVATORY

ANTI RACISM PRINCIPLES

Anti-racism is about more than pledges and good intentions. To meaningfully combat racism in healthcare, we need to think about tangible actions. This series of briefings highlights concrete steps that healthcare providers can take to ensure that their services work for everyone, regardless of the colour of their skin.

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2. UNDERSTAND AND ACKNOWLEDGE RACISM

INTRO

For leaders and organisations to effectively tackle racism, they need to first understand the nuances and complexities of how racism can manifest. This involves reading about racism, talking to experts, and listening to the views from staff of different ethnicities (see Principle 3). The British Medical Journal's 2025 special issue, _Racism in medicine_, highlighted some of the multiple ways that racism manifests in medicine for both patients and staff.

We must not just name racism, but acknowledge it wherever it has an impact, and be clear about the role that everyone must play in eliminating it.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

We know that racism takes many forms and that it impacts health in different and interconnected ways. Structural racism impacts the social determinants of health - the conditions in which people are born, grow, work, and age – and that these social determinants directly influence people's health. In the NHS, we also see institutional racism, where policies and practices are shaped around entrenched biases or assumptions, leading to people of certain racial backgrounds being refused pain medication or referred to different services for example. Finally, experiences of covert and overt interpersonal racism in the NHS damage people's health and weaken the health workforce.

Having a superficial understanding of racism can result in organisations taking actions that do not make a meaningful impact. In some cases, taking the wrong actions as a result of misunderstanding racism can actually make this worse for patients and staff of all ethnicities. Understanding how racism influences health is important to develop and implement approaches to address ethnic and racial health inequity. However, a clear culture of accountability is critical for ongoing prevention of harm and to enable redress.

AN EXAMPLE IN PRACTICE

North East London Foundation Trust (NELFT) provides an extensive range of integrated community and mental health services for people living in the London boroughs of Barking and Dagenham, Havering, Redbridge, and Waltham Forest and community health services for people living in parts of Essex. Between 2016 and 2018, NELFT saw sustained improvements across all Workforce Race Equality Standard indicators from 2016 - 2018.

Through engagement with racially minoritised staff, working with race equality experts, and reverse mentoring, leaders in the organisation developed a deep understanding of racism in general, and in the NHS more specifically. NELFT's then CEO would acknowledge racism at induction sessions, on social media, and at board meetings. This public acknowledgement made it clear that eliminating racism was an organisational priority .

Understanding and acknowledging racism should also be reflected in the actions of organisations and leaders, practically embedded in resources, policies, and governance. Organisations that ensure that leaders and managers at all levels are engaged in developing, implementing and monitoring anti-racism strategies tend to be more successful in achieving their goals.

HOW TO GET STARTED

- **Everyone** must educate themselves about racism. There are different types of books and resources to suit everyone, from textbooks and autobiographies, to documentaries and podcasts. It's important to realise that there are no homogenous ethnic groups and people should try to get a fuller understanding about racism in all its manifestations.

- If you're a **leader**, create and encourage the use of transparent, effective pathways for patients and staff to raise concerns about racism, and ensure concerns are addressed to enable accountability and action.

- If you're a **leader**, ensure that local data – for both your workforce and your patients – is split by ethnicity. You should engage with what this data tells you and take steps to eliminate any inequities (see Principle 1).

- If you're a **commissioner**, seek out, share, and incentivise examples of effective practice, including those below:

    - Tackling racism in the workplace – mental health providers.
    - The Inclusive Recruitment Toolkit : Workforce Transformation
    - Transforming culture – an example from perinatal services.
    - Becoming an anti-racist organisation – the example of South London Health Innovation Network