

Celebrating African American Medical and Nutrition Pioneers

written by Dr. Ronald Hoffman | February 17, 2023



In commemoration of Black History Month, I've compiled an impressive list of prominent African American health professionals who made major contributions to medicine and nutritional science . . .

James Derham (1762-1802?): Before Black people were permitted to undergo formal medical training, James Derham, who was born into slavery, honed his proficiency assisting prominent white physicians. Historians record, *"By 1788, Derham had become a very reputable throat specialist and was particularly noted for his treatment of diphtheria and yellow fever. He saved many lives during a yellow fever outbreak in 1789. He was known not only for his skills as a doctor but because he also treated white patients and those of other racial backgrounds. He was even recognized by the physician and political leader Benjamin Rush, co-founder of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia, who encouraged Derham to return to Philadelphia and open up a practice there."*

James McCune Smith, MD (1813-1865): In 1837, Smith became the first Black American to receive a medical degree – although he had to enroll at the University of Glasgow Medical School because of racist admissions practices at U.S. medical schools. He became a leading abolitionist and wrote numerous scientific articles challenging prevailing notions of Black racial inferiority. In New York, Smith established his medical practice at 55 West Broadway—which defied precedent by attracting White and Black patients alike—and where he also opened the first Black-owned pharmacy in the United States. Smith served for 20 years as the medical director of the Colored Orphan Asylum, where he endeavored to improve conditions and promote literacy and education.

Rebecca Lee Crumpler, MD (1831–1895): In 1864, after years as a nurse, Rebecca Lee Crumpler became the first Black woman in the United States to receive an MD degree, the only Black graduate of the New England Female Medical College in Boston. Upon receiving her degree, she turned her attention to addressing the medical needs of formerly enslaved people in Richmond, Virginia.

George Washington Carver (1864-1943): Born into slavery, Carver became a prominent agricultural scientist, who headed the modern organic movement in the Southern agricultural system. Known to most for his groundbreaking work with peanuts, he was a proponent of innovative crop rotation methods to restore soils depleted by environmentally destructive cotton monoculture. One of his mottoes was "Be clean both inside and out."

William Augustus Hinton (1883-1959): The son of two formerly enslaved people, Hinton was the developer of the first test for syphilis; he became internationally known as an expert in its diagnosis and treatment. In 1936, he published the first medical textbook by a Black American: *Syphilis and Its Treatment*. Declining an achievement award from the NAACP, he preferred to be recognized for his scientific accomplishments and not merely because he was Black. He declared: "Race should never get mixed up in the struggle for human welfare."

Charles Richard Drew, MD (1904-1950): Dr. Drew was instrumental in developing blood transfusion and blood banking technology; in the lead-up to World War 2, he was the medical director of the United States' Blood for Britain project. Numerous schools and health-related facilities, as well as other institutions, have been named in honor of Dr. Drew, including the Martin Luther King Jr./Drew Medical Center in Los Angeles.

Flemmie Pansy Kittrell (1904-1980): Dr. Kittrell was the first African American woman to earn a Ph.D. in nutrition. Her research focused on such topics as protein requirements in adults, the proper feeding of Black infants, and the importance of preschool enrichment experiences for children. Kittrell began an international crusade to improve nutrition, visiting numerous countries and setting up home economics programs abroad.

Myra Adele Logan, MD (1908-1977): Dr. Logan is known for being the first Black woman to perform open heart surgery. She was involved in the development of the antibiotic Aureomycin, and advocated for civil rights with the NAACP and the New York State Commission on Discrimination.

Alfred D. Hershey, Ph.D. (1908-1997): In 1969, Dr. Hershey became the first Black recipient of the Nobel Prize in Medicine and Physiology for his "discoveries concerning the replication mechanism and the genetic structure of viruses". Hershey coined the term "bacterial recombination", the process by which bacteria exchange genetic information that may confer antibiotic resistance.

Marie Maynard Daly, Ph.D. (1921-2003): Dr. Daly was the first African American woman to obtain a Ph.D. in chemistry in the United States, and conducted important research on the effects of various dietary constituents on arterial health. She was a professor at Albert Einstein College of Medicine during my medical training in the 80s, and did much to support the recruitment, training and mentorship of minority medical students and scientists.

Lenora Moragne, Ph.D., MS, RD (1931-2020): A pioneer in public nutrition, Dr. Moragne's positions within the federal government included nutrition

coordinator at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and head of nutrition education and training for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service. She was also the first woman (of any race) to serve on the Senate Agriculture Committee.

William G. Coleman, Jr., MD (1942-2014): Dr. Coleman became the first permanent African American scientific director in the history of the NIH Intramural Research Program (IRP) when he was appointed to direct the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities' (NIMHD's) intramural research program in January 2011. Under Coleman's leadership, NIMHD's intramural program focused on three scientific research areas for which there are significant health disparities: cancer, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes.

Ben Carson, MD (1951-): Born in Detroit to parents who migrated from the rural South, Carson became the director of pediatric neurosurgery at the Johns Hopkins Children's Center in 1984 at age 33, then the youngest chief of pediatric neurosurgery in the United States. In 1987 he led a 70-person team that performed breakthrough surgery to separate conjoined twins. In 2015, Carson campaigned for the Republican presidential nomination. He has written, "When I treat other people with kindness and love, it is part of my way of paying my debt to God and the world for the privilege of living on this planet."

John M. Flack, MD, MPH (1955-): Dr. Smith serves as the Vice President of The American Society of Hypertension Board and sat on six other professional boards throughout his career. He stated "a diet loaded with fried foods and salt, and sugar can be as harmful as living in a food desert—your neighborhoods without access to fresh fruits and vegetables." He is also an advocate for vitamin D as an inexpensive, readily-available supplement with potential to stave off hypertension and improve blood sugar in overweight, chronically vitamin D deficient African Americans.

Evelyn F. Crayton: Dr. Crayton is a professor emeritus of nutrition, dietetics, and hospitality management, and assistant director of extension family and consumer sciences at Auburn University. In 2015, she became the first African American president of the 76,000 member American Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.

Tambra Raye Stevenson is an African American entrepreneur, nutrition educator, public speaker, policy advisor, inventor, and food justice activist. She was recently interviewed on *Intelligent Medicine*. She is the founder of WANDA (Women Advancing Dietetics and Nutrition) and NativSol

Kitchen. She endeavors to apply insights gained via her ancestral diet research to grassroots community nutrition initiatives. Her African journey to discover her culinary roots earned her the National Geographic Traveler of the Year award in 2014.

NOTE: The foregoing may contain significant omissions, which should in no way diminish the extraordinary contributions of numerous other African American health practitioners and nutritionists, many of whom overcame formidable barriers to advancement.