

An Instrument of Social Justice

An Interview with Philip O. Ozuah, MD, PhD, President and Chief Executive Officer, Montefiore Medicine

EDITORS' NOTE *Dr. Philip Ozuah is the President and CEO of Montefiore Medicine, the umbrella organization for Montefiore Health System and Albert Einstein College of Medicine. A nationally recognized physician, leader, executive, researcher, teacher and author, Dr. Ozuah previously served as President of Montefiore Health System. A National Institutes of Health (NIH)-funded researcher and award-winning educator, he also served as Professor and University Chairman of Pediatrics at Albert Einstein College of Medicine and Physician-in-Chief of Children's Hospital at Montefiore. Dr. Ozuah has been recognized locally and nationally for excellence in teaching and patient care, including as an inductee into the Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Medical Society and a two-time recipient of the Academic Pediatric Association's prestigious Helfer Award for Innovation in Medical Education. Along with his various awards for teaching and clinical excellence, Dr. Ozuah has also been recognized by Modern Healthcare as one of the "Top 25 COOs in Healthcare." Dr. Ozuah earned his medical degree from the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, a master's degree in education from the University of Southern California and a PhD in educational leadership and administration from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He completed his Pediatric Internship and Residency at Albert Einstein College of Medicine and Montefiore, and his Post-Doctoral Fellowship in Medical Education at the University of Southern California School of Medicine.*



Philip O. Ozuah

Will you discuss Montefiore's long and deep commitment to diversity and inclusion and how this focus is a part of the Montefiore culture?

Diversity and inclusion aren't goals at Montefiore, they are our way of life. Equity and fairness are what we do and what we have always done. We define medicine as an instrument of social justice. We are a literal celebration of humanity, a place where all are welcome to join us in our quest for excellence, and where all receive the support and encouragement they need to thrive and succeed. Our difference is our commitment, to each other and to the people we serve, to create a community of care that reflects the rich variety of the communities and the world we share.

Our commitment to diversity and inclusion began in 1889, when Montefiore became a non-sectarian hospital that welcomed all religions. The first woman doctor joined the house staff in 1916, practically unheard of in those days. During the 1930s, Black medical residents were accepted to Montefiore at a time when such integration was rare. Today, our workforce is over 71 percent female and over 70 percent people of color. We continue to harness the power of diversity by providing an environment where associates know they can be themselves wholeheartedly, unapologetically and without judgement. They recognize our commitment

to social justice, along with our core values of fairness, inclusion, innovation and teamwork. They feel valued, engaged and empowered to do their best every day.

While diversity and inclusion is the right thing to do, you have also stated that it is critical for driving better business results. Will you elaborate on how diversity and inclusion impacts business performance?

It's the success of our mission that drives our success as a business. At Montefiore, there is no difference between who we serve and who we are. There are no barriers between our staff and the people who come to us for help. We have evidence to show that a workforce that's more reflective of the population it serves delivers better, more sensitive care. Our diversity is critical for the success of our mission, which is to promote health and provide world-class care to every person who comes through our door. By focusing on diversity and inclusive leadership at Montefiore, we see more engaged, socially responsible actions and behaviors from our associates, improved communication and workplace culture, and increased patient satisfaction and quality outcomes. That is how we succeed as a business.

What are the keys to being effective in attracting and retaining diverse talent and how is Montefiore making sure that it is reaching a diverse talent pool?

The key is to find the best people, regardless of their background. It's about pursuing

INSTITUTION BRIEF *Montefiore Medicine (montefiore.org) is the umbrella organization overseeing both Montefiore Health System and Albert Einstein College of Medicine. Montefiore Health System is comprised of 11 hospitals, including Children's Hospital at Montefiore and Burke Rehabilitation Hospital, employs nearly 40,000 people, and has nearly 8 million patient interactions a year throughout four New York counties: The Bronx, Westchester, Rockland and Orange. In addition, Montefiore recently ranked among the top 1 percent of hospitals in seven specialties by U.S. News & World Report. For more than 100 years, Montefiore has been nationally recognized for innovating new treatments, procedures and approaches to patient care, producing stellar outcomes and raising the bar for health systems around the country and around the world.*

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excellence at all levels of the organization and then it’s about having an attitude of inclusiveness. If you are pursuing excellence, and you are committed to inclusiveness, that helps you even in areas where talent is rare and hard to find. Inclusiveness tends to permeate, and after a while, once you reach a certain critical mass, it’s no longer an issue. The quality of your people and the talent you have assembled helps you to recruit more people with the skills and attitudes that meet your standards.

Montefiore believes in identifying and recruiting talent from both traditional and non-traditional candidate pools, representing diverse backgrounds, skillsets and geographic locations. We are dedicated to growing leaders at all levels through learning and the implementation of innovative leadership practices. Our Leadership Academy, for example, sponsors a leadership onboarding program to ensure that new leaders at Montefiore have the tools, training and support necessary for success.

How important are metrics to measure and track the impact of Montefiore’s diversity efforts?

Our diversity metrics drive our transformation efforts, highlight operational performance, and show us where our initiatives are succeeding and how we can improve. Two big numbers, the fact that our workforce is over 71 percent female and over 70 percent people of color, certainly confirm our commitment to inclusivity. Another good example is our participation

in the annual Human Rights Campaign Health Equality Index (HEI). HEI is a national benchmarking tool that evaluates healthcare facilities’ policies and practices related to the equity and inclusion of LGBTQ patients, visitors and associates. The effort is spearheaded by an associate-led, inclusion committee that uses the HEI tool to establish benchmarks, identify gaps and develop strategies to ensure Montefiore continues to be a champion for LGBTQ staff, patients, and community partners. For the past four consecutive years, Montefiore has been recognized as a LGBTQ Healthcare Equality Leader for our commitment to equitable, knowledgeable healthcare to LGBTQ patients and their families, and as a safe, inclusive workplace for our associates.

Montefiore serves a diverse population and diverse communities. How critical is it for Montefiore’s workforce to mirror the diversity of its patients and communities?

Forty-three percent of our employees live in the Bronx, a community of 1.42 million where 59 percent of residents speak a language other than English at home, 26 percent of households have income below the poverty level and 30 percent of adults didn’t graduate from high school. We know our community and they know us. We understand each other. Our tight connection to our Bronx neighbors was never more important than during the coronavirus pandemic, when we fought side-by-side to beat COVID-19, which has had such a disproportionate impact on people of color and the poor.

Faced with a terrifying and deadly new threat, they knew they could count on us to see them through it. Serving our neighbors’ healthcare needs is just part of what we do. Over the years, the Montefiore Community Workforce Program has formed several partnerships with community-based organizations that empower disadvantaged populations and prepare them for the workforce, including employment through us.

How is Montefiore making sure that its diverse talent has opportunities to grow and lead within the health system in order to retain this talent?

One key is staying true to our mission, which is what inspires us and the reason people want to be part of what we do. Another is creating an array of opportunities to get ahead. In 2013, we formed the Office of Leadership, Engagement and Diversity (LEAD) to develop and implement initiatives to broaden the pool of minority and disadvantaged students who can go on to thrive as physicians and scientists. We work very closely with our labor unions, creating and funding numerous opportunities for career advancement, further education and the acquisition of new skills. For other parts of the workforce we have, essentially, what I call the “Montefiore University,” a slate of programs where we take people from all across the system and groom them in a formal way. The evidence for the effectiveness of that effort is the fact that the vast majority of our senior roles are filled from within. This diversity at the top ensures that Montefiore remains true to its commitment to identify, recruit, train and support people from all backgrounds.

What do you tell young, diverse talent about the career opportunities that exist in the industry?

I said it before, but it bears repeating – at Montefiore, we view medicine as an instrument of social justice. To advance that cause, we have multiple partnerships with local organizations to ensure that our workforce reflects the diversity of the communities we serve. The diversity of our staff is a strength that fosters an environment free from cultural bias, delivers equitable and culturally-competent care, and improves the health of the people who depend on us. Young people interested in careers in healthcare should seek out institutions that share those core values – places where they can grow, develop as leaders and make an impact by addressing the health inequities that plague too many of our communities. ●

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