

Shedding Light on the Dark Reality of Disparities in Perinatal Care

Viveka Prakash Zawisza, MD, FACOG

The National Perinatal Association (NPA) is an interdisciplinary organization that strives to be a leading voice for perinatal care in the United States. Our diverse membership is comprised of healthcare providers, parents & caregivers, educators, and service providers, all driven by their desire to give voice to and support babies and families at risk across the country.

Members of the NPA write a regular peer-reviewed column in Neonatology Today.



The National Perinatal Association endeavors to develop a conference each year around a particularly salient theme of importance to perinatal health advocates. This year's conference "Improving Access to Perinatal Care: Confronting Disparities and Inequities in Maternal-Infant Health" was no exception. The rising maternal mortality rate in the United States is of serious concern but embedded within that is the additional disturbing statistic that the maternal mortality rate for black women is 3-4 times higher than for white women. Some awareness of this troubling fact was brought to the national consciousness through the widely publicized story of Serena Williams. The repeated dismissal of her symptoms by her providers and the ultimate delayed diagnosis of a postpartum pulmonary embolism is a story to which many black mothers can relate. For every

high-profile near-miss, there are hundreds of lives lost of women whose names we may never know; their children left without mothers for a lifetime. NPA's conference delved into the reasons why maternal and infant mortality and other perinatal health issues disparately affect marginalized communities, with an emphasis, as always, on a multidisciplinary approach.

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The first day started with a panel on perinatal care for patients with disabilities, featuring Dr. Monika Mitra, the Director of the Lurie Institute for Disability Policy at Brandeis University, Dr. John Harris, an OB/GYN from UPMC-Magee Women's Hospital, and Nicole Lomerson, MPH, a public health expert and parent. This session was sponsored by the Family Advocacy Network and was a highly successful demonstration of the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to perinatal care. The conference officially opened with a powerful keynote address from Dr. Joia Crear-Perry, an OB/GYN and advocate for reproductive justice who founded the National Birth Equity Collaborative (www.birthequity.org). Dr. Crear-Perry gave many eye-opening statistics and evidence-based hypotheses about why disparities in perinatal care are harming black women and infants in our country. The morning continued with an inspiring talk from Dr. Christopher DeRienzo, a neonatologist from Asheville, North Carolina and leader in quality and data analytics. Dr. DeRienzo applied lessons he has learned from his

practice caring for vulnerable babies to the challenging work being done to address disparities in health. Following this, there was a presentation on addressing racial inequities within an organization with Beth Buxton, LICSW and Stephanie Campbell, MPH from the Massachusetts Department of Public Health. They presented many actionable steps that any organization can take to increase internal awareness and dialogue around race and racism. The day concluded with a panel on NPA's recent position paper "Disparities and Health Care Access" on which I had the privilege to participate along with Dr. Jerry Ballas and Aarin Williams, JD, from National Advocates for Pregnant Women.

The second day continued to build the momentum with an opening address from Aarin Williams, JD on protecting the rights of pregnant people in states where fetal personhood is a controversial reality. This was followed by an inspiring talk by Dr. Neel Shah, an OB/GYN at Harvard Medical School and Director of Delivery Decisions initiative at Ariadne Labs on designing perinatal systems to protect the dignity of parents and babies as they grow their families. His work is internationally lauded, and he and his team continue to develop innovative solutions to address disparities in perinatal health. The day continued with a breakout session featuring three concurrent presentations: Mimi Niles, CNM on the role of midwifery in combating disparities, Dr. Naomi Bar-Yam from Mother's Milk Bank Northeast on improving access to donor milk in disadvantaged communities, and Dr. Stacy Seyb on disparities in rural communities. The afternoon went on with the annual address from NPA President Dr. Jerry Ballas wherein he spoke about the "why" at the heart of NPA's mission and the current variety of workgroups and programs within the organization with a call to action for all who are interested in joining. This was followed by a presentation on perinatal mental health disparities by Dr. Karen Tabb Dina from the University of Illinois. Dr. Dina discussed some innovative approaches to community research and the challenges of capturing racial in-

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equities in study design. The day concluded with an energizing talk by Katie Schubert, Chief Advocacy Officer at the Society for Maternal-Fetal Medicine. Ms. Schubert discussed current legislation related to perinatal health issues and ways to get involved as perinatal health advocates.

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The third and final day of the conference featured two dynamic speakers. First, Dr. Alison Stuebe, a high-risk OB/GYN specialist from University of North Carolina, discussed disparities in the fourth trimester, bringing awareness to an issue that will be the central theme of next year’s NPA conference. Following this, Dr. Liddy Hope, a psychologist from Elgin Community College in Illinois, spoke about working with LGBTQ+ families in the context of perinatal care. Both speakers provided illuminating data and concrete tools that all providers can use to improve the care they deliver. The conference ended on a high note, leaving all in attendance with a renewed sense of purpose and a powerful vision of a world where all parents, babies, and families have equal access to high-quality care and are able to build strong families regardless of what they look like or how much privilege they have. As this year’s conference shed light on the stark realities of health inequity in the United States, there has never been a more relevant and urgent need for an organization like NPA. By keeping at its core the mission to educate, advocate, and convene through a multidisciplinary approach, NPA is uniquely positioned to meaningfully impact the perinatal community by addressing disparities in perinatal health. We welcome all members of the community to join in this critical work so we can collectively transform health injustice for some into health justice for all.

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Corresponding Author



Viveka Zawisza, MD FACOG
National Perinatal Association Board Member
viveka.zawisza@gmail.com

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