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February 15, 2011

Darrel Regier, M.D., MPH
Director, Division of Research
American Psychiatric Association
Suite 1825
1000 Wilson Blvd.
Arlington, VA 22209

Dear Dr. Regier:

The Black Psychiatrists of America (BPA), established in 1969, seeks to optimize the mental health of people of African descent in the Americas and across the African Diaspora. The BPA has maintained close ties with psychiatrists and allied mental health professionals concerned about black people across North and South America, the Caribbean and Africa. As such, this organization has a responsibility to be a voice of advocacy to ensure the proper handling of any matter or initiative affecting understanding of mental health needs, psychiatric diagnosis and treatment of black populations across the Diaspora.

It is our duty to bring to your attention our concern about the DSM-5 process and its lack of focus on ensuring adequate inclusion of patients of African descent in the in field trials, particularly in the United States. The institutions that were chosen to participate in the field trials do not have a track record of successful recruitment of black patients in psychiatric clinical investigation. We have been made aware that institutions conducting field trials currently are having difficulty identifying and attracting black patients to enroll as subjects in the field trial interviews. This does not surprise us, given the extent to which departments of psychiatry in “majority” academic medical institutions in the U.S. typically struggle with and fall short in achieving representative samples of racially, ethnically and culturally diverse patients in their research studies. Dr. David Satcher’s Surgeon General’s Report on Mental Health Supplement on Culture, Race and Ethnicity identified the underrepresentation in research of diverse populations as one of the issues contributing to misdiagnosis, substandard quality of care and the excess psychiatric disability burden borne by African Americans and other people of color in the U.S.

BLACK PSYCHIATRISTS OF AMERICA

BPA MISSION

The mission of the BPA is to address issues affecting the Mental Health of African-Americans and to provide a forum for continuing education for those who provide psychiatric care.



We want to hear from you what criteria were used to select the institutions participating in the DSM-5 field trials. The lack of inclusion of departments of psychiatry led by black psychiatrists serving large populations of African Americans, such as historically black medical institutions (Howard, Meharry, and Morehouse), is unacceptable. Given that these are the only institutions that have been able to recruit consistently sufficient samples of black patients in their psychiatric research studies we question the decision-making of the DSM-5 leadership in overlooking these institutions as field trial sites.

Recent efforts to recruit, for the second version of field testing, mental health professionals working in routine clinical practice settings, will not address the gaping hole created by the lack of inclusion of black patients in the institutional field trials. First, the amount of time required may be prohibitive for solo practitioners who are already struggling in the current economic and medical practice climate. Furthermore, the numbers of black patients participating through the individual practitioner pathway will undoubtedly be small, at best. The most effective way to garner a representative sample of black patients in the field trials is through participation of historically black medical schools. These settings serve large populations of African Americans who have a positive history and relationship with the institution and greater trust with its clinicians, thereby increasing the likelihood of interest and participation in a study such as the DSM-5 field trial.

In this year, 2011, declared by the United Nations as the International Year of People of African Descent, we strongly urge you to remedy this glaring oversight by exploring immediately the willingness and capacity to conduct a DSM-5 field trial among the departments of psychiatry of the three major historically black medical institutions in the U.S., Howard, Meharry and Morehouse. We also urge you to consider including as field trial sites at least one medical institution in the Caribbean, such as the University of the West Indies in Jamaica and one medical institution in Africa, such as the University of Ibadan in Nigeria, both of which have a history of leadership in psychiatric research in populations of African descent. If these actions are not taken and these institutions are left out, we seriously question the intent of the DSM-5 to be a truly inclusive and international document that is pertinent and relevant to the diversity of people, in particular, black people, for which it will be used to diagnose and treat.

Sincerely,

P.A. Newton, M.D., MPH, M.A.

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Black Psychiatrists of America

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