HOMEPAGE

Doctors call out group for failing to include black physicians in top award

BY BRYAN MENA
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Dr. Joseph Elvis Guinn, M.D. (left) and Dr. Michael E. Brooks, M.D. stand outside the Marion J. Brooks Building in Fort Worth, named after Michael Brooks' uncle. BOB BOOTH *SPECIAL TO THE STAR-TELEGRAM*

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The Golden-Headed Cane award has been the Tarrant County Medical Society's most prestigious honor since 1951.

Every year, the Medical Society presents this award to a physician within its membership "who symbolizes the pursuit of the highest standards of scientific excellence and integrity," according to the award's official description.

The winner is actually given a golden-headed cane — like the ones English physicians from the 17th century used — and they're usually celebrated during a dinner at the Fort Worth Club in the fall.

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The Medical Society calls this physician "the doctor's doctor." In the decades-long history of the award, no Black person has received it, two Black doctors in Fort Worth say. They come from families of successful physicians that have lived in Tarrant County for generations.

The two Black doctors — Dr. Joseph Guinn and Dr. Michael Brooks — say the situation is an example of systemic racism.

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Brian Swift, the chief executive of the Medical Society, said he doesn't know if a Black doctor has ever won the award because he's only been in that job for 10 years. When asked to confirm that no Black doctor has ever won the award, a spokesperson for the Medical Society said the organization wouldn't comment further.

Swift said racism is not a factor. The winner of the award is a matter of who gets the most votes, he said.

BLACK DOCTORS SPEAK OUT

Guinn is a vascular surgery specialist who's been practicing in Fort Worth since the 1990s. He says that there's no doubt that talented African American physicians have practiced in Tarrant County, but they've all been passed over for the award.

"We've always had African American giants in the medical community here that are certainly deserving but they're passed over year after year. Those have been people like my father," he said.

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His father was Dr. Edward Guinn, an African American physician who practiced medicine for more than 60 years in the medically underserved area of Stop Six in East Fort Worth. He was also elected as Fort Worth's first African American city council member in 1967.

Edward Guinn received several recognitions throughout his life, including a proclamation by the City of Fort Worth for community service, the Ashbel Smith Distinguished Alumnus Award from his alma mater, the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston, and he was recognized by former U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson during the height of his political career. He died at 93 in August 2018.

"And there's lots of other examples. It's simply indisputable of all these (African American) physicians who are deserving," Joseph Guinn said.

He says that at least 25% of the membership at the Medical Society is a minority. He said he doesn't recall a Black doctor being nominated for the award.

The Medical Society did not respond to the Star-Telegram's request for the number of minority doctors who are part of the organization.

Brooks is an African American general surgeon who's been practicing in Fort Worth since 1990, and he comes from a family of accomplished physicians.

His father, Dr. Donald A. Brooks, was the first African American board-certified surgeon to practice in Texas. He later became chief of surgery at the former St. Joseph Hospital in Fort Worth before it ceased operations in the 2000s. Donald Brooks died at 83 in March 2005.

Michael Brooks' uncle is the late Dr. Marion J. Brooks who served Fort Worth's African American community as a physician before he passed away in 2003. He was also a civil rights activist who led a march from Fort Worth to Austin in 1963 to coincide with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s historical March on Washington.

Marion J. Brooks was honored by the Texas House of Representatives through a resolution filed by former Rep. Glenn Lewis in 2003 that recognized his efforts as a medical professional who pushed for "greater opportunities for African American physicians and increased health care options for black patients in Fort Worth."

Tarrant County's public health building on Main Street is named after him.

But no one with the last name Brooks has ever won the Medical Society's Golden-Headed Cane award.

"To me, this is a reflection of systemic racism because it is a process that by its very nature excludes African Americans," Michael Brooks said. "I don't think they're racists. Systemic racism is much more subtle, and a lot of the times it's supported by ignorance or indifference."

"For example, when someone says, 'Why is it this way?' and the response is, 'Well, that's just the way it's always been.' That might sound innocent but that's systemic racism right there," he added.

Joseph Guinn says the numbers speak for themselves — more than half a century of the award's existence in one of the most populated counties in Texas and not a single African American doctor has won the award.

"My siblings and I take all of this to heart," Michael Brooks said.

He says he spoke with Robin Sloane, the former executive director of the Medical Society, several years ago about his disappointment with the award.

He says she told him she was sorry that it's always been that way but that the Medical Society just didn't have any way to correct it.

Sloane says she doesn't recall that conversation but she doesn't doubt that it happened.

"I've talked about the Golden-Headed Cane with many physicians throughout the years but the one thing I always say is to just nominate whoever you want," she said. "When I ran the Medical Society, it had about 3,000 members, and we were all aware that everyone felt differently about everything, including this."

She says that it's not a bad thing that Guinn and Brooks are speaking out.

"Their opinions are valued, and their opinions can be expressed on every single part of that process," she said. "It's a membership association. That's what you do when you're a member, you speak up and they can do it however they want to do it."

THE AWARD

The selection process for the award begins as early as March. To be eligible for the award, physicians must have been members of the Medical Society for at least 20 years and must represent "scientific excellence and integrity," according to the official nomination form sent to the membership.

The list of physicians qualified for the award usually consists of hundreds of names, so to narrow down that pool, members of the Medical Society are asked to send nominations from the list of qualified doctors by mid-March.

The list is then shortened to the 30 people who got the most nominations, which sent to members, who vote for their top three choices. The top vote-getter is chosen as the recipient after a committee counts all of the votes, Swift says.

The Medical Society's chief executive says that "it's probably one of the most democratic processes we have here at the Medical Society."

"Everybody in the membership has a chance to cast a nomination. Everybody," Swift said. "We love the fact that doctors are awarded this award, and it's a great award to get. I think it speaks to the physician community at large."

When asked why a Black physician has never won the Medical Society's Golden-Headed Cane, Swift said it's simply because one hasn't gotten the votes for it yet. He says the Medical Society is "colorblind" and that he sees every physician as just that — a physician.

Fliers of the 30-name short list for this year's award were sent out to members of the Medical Society. Brooks and Guinn say they were surprised when they saw the top left corner of the flier that reads, "Members of TCMS and members of the GHC (Golden-Headed Cane) Committee were asked to nominate candidates."

Guinn and Brooks say that they think it's suspicious that a committee gets to nominate who makes it to the shortlist and they say they wonder if any people of color are on that committee.

But Swift says it's a misunderstanding — the committee doesn't actually nominate anyone. He says the committee is only made up of three people who primarily plan the dinner and handle other logistics, such as counting the ballots.

A 'POPULARITY CONTEST'?

Bob Ray Sanders, communications director of the Fort Worth Metropolitan Black Chamber of Commerce, says he was delivered as a newborn by Dr. Riley Andrew Ransom Sr., a major African American historical figure in Fort Worth.

Ransom founded the first hospital in the city for Blacks in 1914.

He provided Blacks health care during a time when Black doctors were denied access to patients in segregated hospitals and were even denied membership in The

Texas Medical Association up until 1955.

Sanders echoed the concerns of Guinn and Brooks.

“The Black doctors who have been in this community fought against all kinds of odds, were discriminated against in the major hospitals, and still fought for their communities in addition to tending to their medical profession,” Sanders said. “How are they not ‘the doctor’s doctor’? It’s atrocious to me.”

Ransom died in 1951, when the Golden-Headed Cane award was established, but Sanders says there have been several successful Black doctors in recent years who could have been recognized as “the doctor’s doctor.”

Brooks says the core problem with the award is that it’s marketed as “the doctor’s doctor.”

“I wish they would stop calling it that because it’s not objectively reflective of the quality and diversity of all the physicians in this area,” Brooks said. “Stop publicizing it as something that it’s not.”

He points out that the award’s secret ballot process is “clearly part of the problem” because it turns it into “a popularity contest.”

Swift stands by the selection process.

“The democratic process in its purest form is a popularity contest. So, I guess I can’t dispute that,” Swift said. “If that’s a crime, then I guess I’m guilty.”

Swift suggests a solution would be for physicians of all backgrounds in the Medical Society to become more involved with the organization, which includes participating in selecting the recipient of the Golden-Headed Cane award.

Dr. M. Ebadat Ali — the only person of color to receive the Golden-Headed Cane, according to Dr. Robert Sloane — argued for the same thing in the October 2019 issue of the Tarrant County Physician that acknowledged his selection. Dr. Sloane is a retired traumatic surgeon who’s on this year’s Golden-Headed Cane committee.

The publication says he “stresses the importance of membership and participation.”

“The Medical Society and Texas Medical Association have done a wonderful job standing up for physicians and patients. We need to stay united,” Ali said.

Kimberly Burks Agoro is the wife of Dr. Adesubomi Agoro, a pulmonologist and critical care specialist in Fort Worth, and she served as a board member several years ago for the Tarrant County Medical Society Alliance, which is the spousal arm of the Medical Society.

She says that being involved didn’t make any difference when it came to the award.

One year, Burks Agoro was hopeful that Dr. Marilyn King-Rankine would be the first African American to win the Golden-Headed Cane.

King-Rankine’s family says that she was likely Fort Worth’s first Black cardiologist, who also pioneered new cutting-edge techniques during her time as a physician and accomplished many other things.

She didn’t win the award.

“She met all the criteria,” Burks Agoro said. “So, I couldn’t understand why our voting power just wasn’t enough and it’s not because of a lack of voting on behalf of the African American physicians.”

The list of the 30 physicians who got the most nominations for this year’s award does not include any African American physicians.

MEDICAL SOCIETY FIGHTS FOR THE MOST VULNERABLE

Swift says there’s “so much more” to the Medical Society than the Golden-Headed Cane award.

He says that Project Access Tarrant County is an example of how the organization strives to serve the most vulnerable by providing health care access to uninsured and low income people. According to its website, the initiative has provided more than $14.5 million in health care access through charitable clinics to the more than 1,700 patients who’ve enrolled in the program.

“We actually have a lot of minority institutions that participate in that program,” he said.

Swift points out the several committees that operate under the Medical Society, such as the Women in Medicine Committee which he says is a “diverse group of women.”

The chief executive also highlights a plaque that the Medical Society dedicated about a decade ago to successful Black doctors in the history of Tarrant County, honoring Black physicians, such as Dr. Edward Guinn, Dr. Donald Brooks and Dr. Marion J. Brooks. The plaque is located inside the Medical Society's headquarters, and it features portraits of nine prominent Black physicians from the county with a brief description of their legacy below.

But that plaque doesn't even begin to do justice for the Black doctors of Tarrant County's history, Guinn says, calling it "appeasement."

"That's just extremely unfair," Swift responded.

Dr. Robert Sloane told the Star-Telegram in a phone call interview that "there are a lot of qualified doctors out there that just don't get the award." He's the husband of Robin Sloane, the former executive director, and he also won the Golden-Headed Cane in 2005.

"A lot of physicians in the community are worthy, but it's just emblematic. That's all it is," he said.

Dr. Michael E. Brooks, M.D. and Dr. Joseph Elvis Guinn, M.D. photographed next to a photo of the building's namesake Marion J. Brooks. BOB BOOTH *SPECIAL TO THE STAR-TELEGRAM*

BRYAN MENA

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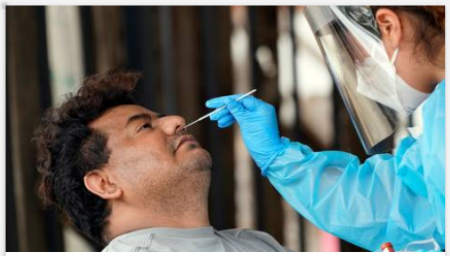

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