



Simkins v. Cone Historical Marker Ceremony

November 1, 2016

The “Occasion” by Alvin C. Powell, MD Chair, Historical Marker Committee, Greensboro Medical Society.

Good afternoon everyone and thank you for coming out to celebrate with us this important national historic event that took place 53 years ago today, when the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled segregation in hospitals as illegal in the United States.

This legal decision was due to the unwavering work of Greensboro’s Dr. George Simkins, Dr. Alvin Blount, Dr. Milton Barnes, 8 other courageous individuals, members of the NAACP legal defense fund, and other good people both Black and White who recognized the injustices of segregation.

To set the stage for this occasion today, I am charged with giving you the history. The history is of a segregated and disparate healthcare environment. The history is painful, ugly, suppressed and often forgotten, but it is factual. And, it is true.

In the Southern US, Jim Crow Laws allowed segregation based upon the fallacy of separate, but equal facilities. As a result of segregation, children and adults suffered from treatable illnesses due to inaccessible, yet available healthcare. Mothers died unnecessarily during childbirth and the Black infant mortality rate was shockingly high.

During this era, Black patients who were able to be hospitalized in segregated hospitals were often treated in hospital basements, attics, relegated to a few beds in a section of a hospital or in a small building separate from the main hospital. This scene was repeated almost everywhere in the South, and some hospitals refused to treat Black patients.

Let me give you some examples.

Just 20 miles from here at Annie Penn Hospital in Reidsville, according to former city councilman George Rucker, hospitalized sick Black patients were not treated upstairs in the typical medical wards, but treated in storage areas on the ground level where supplies like boxes and oxygen tanks were stored.

At Morehead Hospital in Eden Black patients were not allowed admission. According to a local resident Mrs. Martin, if you needed in-patient services (or to be hospitalized) you would

typically be transported to a smaller Black Hospital, either L. Richardson Hospital in Greensboro or Kate Bittings Reynolds Hospital in Winston Salem.

Unfortunately, medical transportation was limited because Black patients could not travel by ambulance services available to White patients. If ambulance services were needed, they had to travel in funeral hearses owned by Black morticians.

A particularly disturbing example of segregation within a hospital occurred in Atlanta Georgia. The massive city hospital Grady Memorial Hospital was the embodiment of pure segregation. That hospital was built with healthcare segregation in mind. It was built in the shape of the letter H (when you looked from above). On one side of the H were Black patients, and on the other side White patients.

This hospital was often referred to as the Gradys, to represent two distinct institutions. There was the White Grady and the Colored Grady. The Gradys had separate kitchens, blood banks, laboratories, treatment facilities and operating rooms. None of the Black doctors in Atlanta were allowed to treat their patients at the Gradys; however, they were able to treat their patients at what was referred to as the “Colored” hospital across the street.

Although segregation was not legal in the Northern states, it was still practiced there. In Boston Massachusetts at the private hospital where I was born in the late 1950s, pregnant Black women were housed in hospital rooms at the furthest end down the hallway. According to my mother, they were last to be attended to, they would receive food that was no longer hot, and clean linen only if any was still available.

Our city of Greensboro was a typical southern city with segregated hospitals. Moses H. Cone Memorial Hospital had an all White medical and dental staff. Black patients were admitted on a case by case basis, but only by White doctors. Wesley Long Hospital did not admit Black patients and had no Black doctors. Like many cities, Greensboro had a smaller, less well equipped, overcrowded hospital primarily for Black physicians and patients---the “Black Hospital”.

The practice of denying qualified Black physicians admitting privileges to White hospitals was routine. That was the situation for Dr. Alvin Blount, who had been Chief of Surgery of an integrated military MASH unit in the Korean war. He was Board Certified in Surgery. He was more qualified than some physicians already on staff at Cone or Long Hospitals.

Dr. Blount and other highly qualified physicians and dentists, and sick patients were denied equal access to hospitals because of their race. That changed forever with the decision of the lawsuit we commemorate today.

In Tuskegee Alabama there is a powerful image of a teacher and student. It is a statute at Tuskegee University of its founder Booker T. Washington who is standing over a freed slave. That former slave is seated, holding a book, preparing to learn and become educated. Booker T.

Washington is reaching over him removing a veil covering the slave's head symbolically representing "removing the veil of ignorance".

On this occasion today, exactly 53 years after the legal decision *Simkins v. Moses H Cone Memorial Hospital*, we will remove the cover from this Historical Marker, and educate people for years to come about a shameful time in American history. But arguably more significant, this Marker will salute the important work done in Greensboro by 11 courageous men, and others who helped them, to legally dismantle a country's segregated healthcare system.

Their actions were pivotal in integrating hospitals, enhancing civil rights and improving healthcare for all Americans.

Thank you.