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Millennials who came of age in the early 2000s will surely remember the hit single “Hot in Herre” by the St. Louis rapper Nelly. For young consumers of pop culture, Nelly was a familiar face at the start of the 21st century, famous for his catchy songs and his signature look: a white Band-Aid perpetually worn on his left cheek.^[1] While Nelly’s distinctive aesthetic has garnered a great deal of attention, his facial accessory presents a unique opportunity to reflect on the literal and metaphorical Band-Aid solutions that have been used to treat systemic racism.

The Band-Aid brand bandages that furnish aisles in pharmacies and grocery stores were first invented over 100 years ago by a Johnson & Johnson cotton buyer named Earle E. Dickson. Prior to his invention, Dickson was constantly fashioning makeshift bandages to treat the minor cuts and burns his wife sustained while cooking.^[2] His solution was a ready-made bandage that his wife could administer at a moment’s notice. The Band-Aid, which entered commercial markets in 1921, was crafted using two existing J & J products: surgical tape and gauze.^[3] A century later, J & J has sold over 100 billion Band-Aids worldwide.^[4] While the product line has expanded to incorporate new shapes and sizes, the “flesh colored” Band-Aid remained uniquely pink in hue until 2020, when civil unrest surrounding anti-Black police brutality forced corporations like J & J to take action.

The murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd in 2020 brought racial inequality in America back to the forefront of public discourse. Amidst the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, their deaths were a reminder that Black Americans and people of color remain disproportionately affected by police brutality, systemic racism, and public health neglect. In response to growing calls for action from BLM protesters, activists, and outraged citizens, institutions ranging from professional sports leagues to healthcare companies began adapting

their language and practices in social media posts, emails to consumers, and advertising to acknowledge these inequities.

On June 10th, 2020, Johnson & Johnson announced that it would be expanding its product line to include more diverse skin tones. In an Instagram post accompanied by a photo of its new Band-Aid collection, the company said, “We hear you. We see you. We’re listening to you. We stand in solidarity with our Black colleagues, collaborators and community in the fight against racism, violence and injustice. We are committed to taking actions to create tangible change for the Black Community. We are committed to launching a range of bandages in light, medium and deep shades of Brown and Black skin tones that embrace the beauty of diverse skin. We are dedicated to inclusivity and providing the best healing solutions, better representing you.”^[5]

Many saw the announcement as being too little too late. While corporations have become increasingly mindful of their messaging, there is understandable public skepticism of what this lip service does to combat white supremacy. As Dr. Duana Fullwiley, an Associate Professor of Medical Anthropology at Stanford University noted, “It’s ironic to have a diverse Band-Aid in this time. The metaphor of a band-aid is a quick fix that covers a wound. A band-aid solution is not a deep-healing solution.”^[6] Indeed, the dominance of whiteness as a cultural and medical norm goes far deeper than the product marketing of a Band-Aid. Remnants of white supremacist ideologies are embedded in all kinds of medical products and standards.

Like Band-Aids, medical prostheses labeled “flesh colored” have only resembled the skin tones of white people until recently.^[7] Lack of representation in skin color takes on even greater significance when it comes to recognizing signs of illness. As Cherise Seucharan notes, “images of darker-skinned patients have largely not been included in medical studies showing how COVID-19 can present on the skin, even as the disease has disproportionately affected people of color in Canada and the United States.”^[8] These omissions can have deadly repercussions.

Nonetheless, independent initiatives to address these health inequities have proven effective at disseminating information to tackle the disproportionate lack of representation in medicine. For instance, Malone Mukwende, a medical student at St. George’s, University of London, developed a clinical handbook in 2020 called *Mind the Gap*.^[9] The handbook provides images and guidelines to help better diagnose skin conditions and diseases in people of color. Instagram accounts like @brownskinmatters, and dermatologists on YouTube like Dr. Alexis Stephens also discuss dermatological conditions that affect people of color and are accessible for a large public audience.^[10]

These institutional and individual efforts are all significant steps forward. However, to continue dismantling systemic racism in medicine, there needs to be more public awareness of the racial biases embedded in medical products, practices, and outcomes. These standards have all been constructed by people who have their own motivations and biases, and in North America, many of these motivations have historically been rooted in white supremacy. Recognizing the social construction of these norms and practices empowers people to fight back against them, and

educating elementary school and high school students is where institutional change needs to begin. Whereas twenty years ago, teenagers listening to Nelly may not have recognized what the St. Louis rapper's Band-Aid symbolized, teenagers today may be more critical of the systemic racism that requires much more than a Band-Aid solution.

Works Cited

[1] Nelly began wearing a Band-Aid on his face to cover up a basketball injury, but he continued wearing it for years after the injury healed as a tribute to his friend and music collaborator, City Spud, who was jailed for armed robbery and sentenced to 10 years in prison. Nelly stopped wearing the Band-Aid once City Spud was released from prison nine years later. <https://www.speeli.com/why-does-hip-hop-star-nelly-have-a-piece-of-tape-on-his-cheek-what-does-it-represent/>

[2] <https://www.bandaid.ca/band-aid-history>

[3] <https://ourstory.jnj.com/first-band-aid-brand-adhesive-bandage>

[4] Ibid.

[5] <https://www.instagram.com/p/CBQdOqOBBve/>

[6] <https://www.forbes.com/sites/marlamilling/2020/06/15/johnson-johnson-announces-new-band-aids-but-that-cant-fix-racial-inequality/?sh=7e2a5edf6e7d>

[7] Lampland, Martha, and Susan Leigh Star, Eds. *Standards and their Stories: How Quantifying, Classifying, and Formalizing Practices Shape Everyday Life*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009.

[8] Seucharan, Cherise. "Dark skinned patients left out of COVID-19 studies, as minorities some of the hardest hit by the virus." *The Globe and Mail*. July 10, 2020.

[9] <https://www.blackandbrownskin.co.uk/mindthegap>

[10] <https://www.instagram.com/brownskinmatters/>

Cover Image: Band-Aid/Instagram