Uncomposed, edited manuscript published online ahead of print.

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**Author:** Sun Haorui

**Title:** Medical Trainee Activism: Leading While Learning

**DOI:** 10.1097/ACM.0000000000004434
Medical Trainee Activism: Leading While Learning

Haorui Sun

Third-year medical student, Pennsylvania State College of Medicine, Hershey, Pennsylvania; email: hsun2@pennstatehealth.psu.edu; ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9807-5411.

Acknowledgments: The author thanks Stephanie Golub for her friendship and Dr. Dalke for her constant support and encouragement.

Funding/Support: None reported.

Other disclosures: None reported.

Ethical approval: Reported as not applicable.

First published online.
To the Editor: From tightening lead regulations in the 1970s to helping prevent nuclear war during the Cold War, physician activism courses throughout the history of medicine. As current events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, Black Lives Matter movement, and Anti-Asian Hate protests continue to highlight inequities affecting the health of our patients, my fellow medical trainees and I feel increasingly compelled to take action. For instance, after a classmate and I noticed few photographs of skin of color in our dermatology curriculum, we worried that this could unintentionally exacerbate health inequities for patients of color. Consequently, with the support of our director of culturally responsive health care education—and after months of work—we added a skin of color textbook, a lecture on skin of color conditions, and skin of color photographs in lesson plans and exams to the dermatology curriculum.

For my classmate and I, enacting change as medical students was difficult, partly because we had no instructions. Thus, here are lessons we learned, which we are sharing to help peers who may be attempting something similar:

1. Read often and stay vigilant. As Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, the pediatrician of the Flint water crisis, wrote, “The eyes don’t see what the mind doesn’t know.” In other words, you cannot improve an issue you have not yet identified. Read up on health inequities so you can identify them in practice.

2. Work with what you know. While it may be tempting to tackle every problem you see, you will get more done by focusing your energy and resources on issues that you are more familiar with, i.e., a course you have gone through yourself.

3. Seek out allies. Find likeminded people—the more allies you have, the more you will be able to do. This is especially true if you can find a faculty member or mentor to support you and/or help connect you with the right people.
4. Replenish yourself. Enacting change is exhausting and takes a toll. Remember to set aside time regularly to recharge, rest, and reflect.

Reference