How Assumptions about Skin Colour Can Reproduce Racism in Physical Therapy Education in Canada

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SPEC Gallery
Our Story

We are MScPT students at the University of Toronto learning about how structural racism can be reproduced in physical therapy. In this teaching resource, we illustrate some of the ways that white skin is often taken as the default norm in PT education, and draw attention to examples of how this can lead to worsened clinical outcomes for people who are racialized.
Pulse Oximetry

"Pulse oximeters, devices used for estimating blood oxygen levels, may be less accurate in people with darker skin pigmentation," FDA (Sawyers, 2016)
Bruises may be less apparent and show less reddening on people with darker skin tones.

People with darker skin tones can show less yellow colour in their bruises than people with white skin tones.

(Mukwende, Tamony, Turner, 2020)

(Rubin, 2019)

(Johnson, 2019)
Erythema (redness)

Bull's-eye pattern in Lyme Disease

This circular expanding red rash is easily identified on lighter coloured skin tones, but much more difficult to recognize on darker skin tones.

Redness

This red appearance of skin is associated with swelling or inflammation, but is more subtle and less easily detectable on darker skin tones compared to lighter skin tones. There can also be different hues or undertones depending on the individual's skin tone.
This is a characteristic of Lupus, this symptom is a purplish, facial rash with a butterfly pattern. Covers the cheeks and the bridge of the nose, but not the rest of the face.
PT Relevance

- Understand that clinical symptoms or conditions can appear differently depending on skin tone
- Raise awareness about overrepresentation of white skin being depicted as the "default" in learning material within PT education (textbooks, images, learning resources)
- Be aware and acknowledge our inherent biases and the way structural racism plays out in the PT profession

(Raynen Therapies, 2019)
References


