



December 19, 2019

Dear UNC Community,

As medical students and future physicians, we take an oath to serve humanity and to do no harm. The effort by the University of North Carolina (UNC) Board of Governors (BOG) to pay \$2.5 million, plus \$74,999 in UNC funds to re-erect Silent Sam and support North Carolina (NC) Sons of Confederate Veterans (SCV) is directly harmful to the people of UNC and NC and contrary to our most important values. Silent Sam and all monuments that seek to publicly uphold notions of white supremacy symbolize the historical and ongoing oppression of people of color through separate and unequal access to education, health, and opportunity. We unequivocally reject the glorification of Silent Sam, the factually inaccurate version of history put forward by the SCV, and the complicity of UNC in maintaining an inequitable society.

We hope that everyone across UNC and UNC School of Medicine (SOM), especially leadership, will use their positions of influence to oppose these actions by the BOG and to disassemble structural racism. We seek concrete actions, including vocal opposition to the BOG's recent subsidizing of SCV, as well as expanded funding, programmatic support, and protection for minority groups who are systematically oppressed at UNC and throughout NC. Dismantling oppression entails reworking the systems that perpetuate racism and prejudice so all people are free from such injustice, as other institutions, including [Georgetown University](#), [SUNY-New Paltz](#), and [Yale University](#), have already begun to do. We believe these actions are steps toward mitigating the oppressive culture furthered by the BOG's decision.

The Silent Sam statue has been a beacon of institutional racism since the day it was proposed by the Daughters of the Confederacy and created with alumni funds solicited by UNC's own president during the Jim Crow era. At the statue's unveiling, Confederate Veteran and UNC Trustee [Julian Carr reminisced](#) about having "horse-whipped a negro wench until her skirts hung in threads [for having] publicly insulted and maligned a Southern lady." Historians have [thoroughly documented](#) that confederate memorials were erected in prominent and public locations across the US during the Jim Crow era in order to provide a clear visual representation of white supremacy. A statue that is by its expressed intent meant to glorify the power of one group of people while reinforcing subjugation of another is designed to cripple a portion of the population and is by nature reinforcing inequity. Rectifying current oppression supersedes historical commemoration.

We are surprised and disappointed that the leadership of an institution with [stated goals](#) of promoting diversity and improving society has failed to condemn publicly and unequivocally both the prejudice that Silent Sam represents and the BOG's latest misguided attempt to relocate the statue. The BOG's financial settlement with SCV and the covert process by which the agreement

was reached are deeply problematic. The BOG has chosen to spend more than \$2.5 million to support an icon of white supremacy and a neo-confederate organization that promotes a false version of history. These funds would be much better spent on recruitment of minority students and faculty, enriching the education of NC's future physicians, and expanding programs to ameliorate health inequalities in Chapel Hill and the rest of NC. Through words and actions, the BOG and UNC leadership have been and continue to be complicit in maintaining an unjust status quo.

The BOG's decision blatantly disrespects students, faculty, and staff of color who call UNC home. The choice to bankroll the SCV demonstrates that UNC values appeasing white supremacists more than uplifting marginalized members of our community. The settlement also perpetuates a culture that makes students, faculty, and staff of color feel unsupported and undervalued at this institution; further alienates current and prospective students, faculty, and staff; and is antithetical to UNC's stated mission to foster diversity on its campus. Having been denied a safe space to live and learn, minority students rightfully question whether UNC values our well-being. NC as a whole will suffer from an educational system that does not energetically encourage, fund, and protect a diverse set of leaders.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health care is the most shocking and inhumane." As medical students, we know that social systems directly affect health; the maintenance of white supremacy leads to negative health effects for Black and Indigenous people. Medical researchers have found that experiencing racism has negative health effects on people of color, and exposure to race-based discrimination across multiple systems of oppression is associated with lower health status, increased rates of disease, and shorter lifespans. By funding neo-confederate groups, UNC undermines the health, safety, and dignity of people of color throughout NC; instead, UNC should dispose of Silent Sam in a way that shows its commitment to supporting people of color. We believe healthcare providers in positions of power have a unique and added responsibility to act in accordance with the high ethical standards to which our profession is committed and to consider the health impacts of institutional policies and actions. We encourage all leaders within NC, and especially physician leaders at UNC, to live up to the commitments we make to do no harm and to be healers in society.

We ask leadership to join us in unilaterally condemning white supremacy and its iconography. As anti-apartheid and human rights activist Desmond Tutu said, "if you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor." We call on our community and leadership to rally against actions, structures, and symbols of oppression. We urge all people to dismantle systems of racism within their spheres of influence; to donate to the [Anti-Racist Activist Fund](#), the [UNC Office of Diversity and Inclusion](#), and the [UNC SOM Office of Scholastic Enrichment & Equity](#); and to invest in scholarship programs that empower students of color. Above all, we call upon the entire community to work with indefatigable determination to create a UNC and NC in which all people have equal respect, rights, safety, and opportunity.

In solidarity,

Student National Medical Association, UNC SOM Chapter
Latino Medical Student Association, UNC SOM Chapter
Medical Student Pride Alliance, UNC SOM Chapter
Islamic Medical Association, UNC SOM Chapter