



Commissioned Corps BULLETIN

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Surgeon General's Column

The commissioned corps is a splendid and diverse company of people. It is that diversity that affords us the opportunity to more effectively carry out the Public Health Service mission. Within our 11 professional categories, just about every medical and public health discipline can be found. The structure and personnel system of the commissioned corps enables the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to better serve its very diverse mission—from program support and assessment of health, to health promotion and disease prevention and emergency response. Because of our mission and our ethics, we are challenged to continue to nurture diversity, relative to gender, race and ethnicity, culture and religion, age, levels of disability, and sexual orientation.

Not long ago, I finished reading an amazing book entitled *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother*. In it, author James McBride tells the story of his life growing up interracially in Harlem, the son of a Jewish mother and a black father. His father died while McBride was still young, leaving him and his brothers and sisters to be raised alone by his Jewish mother, Ruth McBride Jordan. As is often the case, soon after his father's death, McBride began misbehaving and getting into trouble. In one incident, he reflects on how some of the neighborhood boys began teasing him about his white mother and asking how he could be black with a white mother. Upset, young McBride went home and related the incident to his mother. Ruth McBride lovingly consoled her son by telling him that God loved him and that color did not

matter. Trying desperately to understand, McBride asked his mother, "What color is God?" She pointed to a tear that had just landed from her cheek onto to her hand and replied, "God is the color of water."

I told this story in March to a group of 150 participants during the first Department-wide Diversity Conference, which grew out of the Secretary's Quality of Work Life Initiative and President Clinton's Conference on Race in America. The Union-Management Partnership Committee commissioned the HHS Diversity Steering Committee to lead the Department in ensuring diversity. They defined diversity as "the composition and richness that results from a variety of genders, races, cultures, disabilities, ages, languages, sexual orientations, ethnic groups, and religious backgrounds" and will focus on ensuring access, equity of opportunity, and inclusive policies and practices for all employees.

Traditional Approaches to Diversity

Most organizations and institutions in this country have operated out of one of three traditional approaches to diversity. The discrimination model of diversity acknowledges that discrimination has occurred by responding to the lack of diversity within an organization. To overcome the lingering effects of past discrimination using this model, an organization pursues a set of goals designed to address the lack of diversity in gender, race, ethnicity, and culture. The measure of success for this approach focuses on more than simply injecting color to decrease the appearance of discrimination; rather, success is reached when

an organization has reached the point of appreciation for all of the benefits that diversity can bring.

The second strategy is the market approach. This approach acknowledges the need for a diverse workforce in order to best answer the needs of a diverse society. Beyond employing the market approach to diversity, the organization must recognize that simply gaining entree into diverse cultures is not enough. A diverse workforce should enhance an organization's understanding, insight, and respect so that it can produce products that best meet its needs.

The third and, in some ways, the most mature approach is the quality or competence approach to diversity. That approach is based on the belief that diversity is a crucial strategy to success. It values diversity in its own right. It recognizes that in order to ensure the development of a quality product or competent strategy, the process must have diverse input. When that happens, the end result is a better, higher quality, and more fully articulated final product.

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