



ABOUT ELISA P. BELL, MD

Are You Culturally Competent? author Elisa P. Bell, MD brings a variety of perspectives to examining the complex issues of cultural competency facing healthcare professionals across the United States.

A board-certified physician in both adult and child/adolescent psychiatry, she has practiced medicine for 30 years in Illinois, Michigan and Indiana. She has specialized in treating affective disorders, including ADHD, and disruptive behavioral disorders as well as Autism Spectrum Disorders in children and adolescents.

Beginning in 1999, Dr. Bell worked in Illinois' juvenile justice system, focusing on trauma and post-traumatic stress disorders in child and adolescent populations. Today, she treats convicted adult felons at the north central intake region for the Illinois Department of Corrections.

Dr. Bell served as a consultant on matters of child and adolescent psychology for the Urban Health Initiative Center for Community Health and Vitality at the University of Chicago in 2010. She also wrote the document addressing community mental health issues for The Woodlawn Zone Project and served on the CARC Board at the University of Chicago for ongoing research in the African American Community in Chicago.

A distinguished alumna of Southern Illinois University School of Medicine, Dr. Bell completed an internship in pediatrics at Loyola Medical

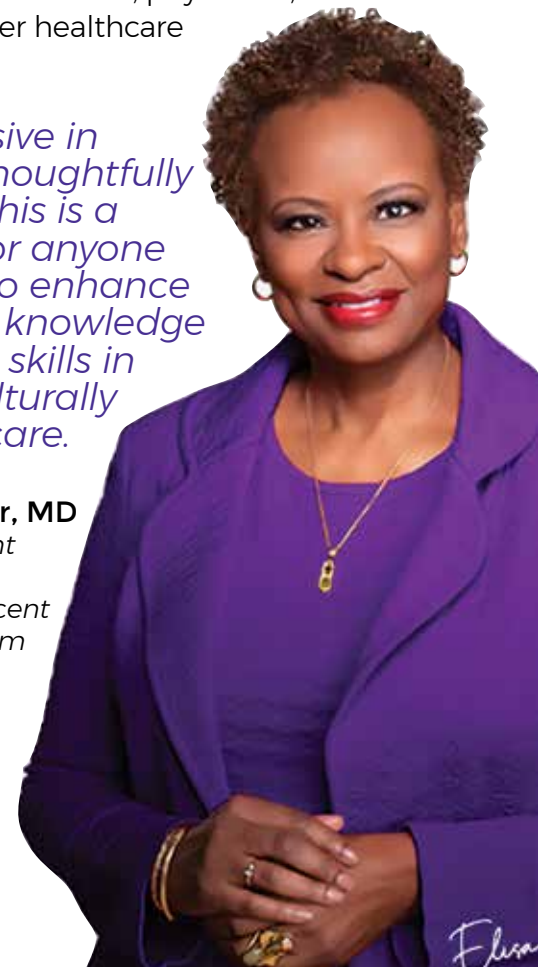
Center in Maywood, Illinois an adult residency in psychiatry at Illinois State Psychiatric Institute, and a fellowship in child and adolescent psychiatry at the University of Michigan Hospital in Ann Arbor.

This important, timely and engaging book is written for a wide audience including counselors, teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators, psychologists, social workers, physicians, residents in training and other healthcare workers.

Comprehensive in scope and thoughtfully composed, this is a must read for anyone who wants to enhance their fund of knowledge and develop skills in providing culturally competent care.

Renee Mehinger, MD

*Former Outpatient
Medical Director
Child and Adolescent
Psychiatry Program
Rush University,
Chicago, Illinois*





Frequently Asked Questions

What is cultural competency?

Cultural competency is rooted in ongoing self-examination and includes being mindful of how a person's assumptions and thinking can be biased or prejudiced. It requires a deep exploration of how one's culture impacts a person's mindset, beliefs and actions towards people of all cultural groups. This ongoing process enables professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations.

Yet, the process is never final because culture is ever changing. No one can be 100 percent culturally competent. An organization can support cultural competency through training and policies, but communications, behaviors and thought processes rely on individuals to adopt these new practices.

Cultural competency is different from affirmative action, which is a policy or program by an organization that seeks to reduce the consequences of past discrimination through measures that ensure equal opportunity in education and employment.

Inclusion programs include designation of certain months to provide platforms for groups which have experienced discrimination. These educational programs offer an initial way to learn about cultures and affinity groups that are different than the ones to which professionals are affiliated or belong.

Why is cultural competency essential for healthcare professionals?

Cultural competency, the ability to understand and communicate with people who have different life experiences and heritages, impacts the quality of patient care. When medical professionals become aware of their conscious and unconscious biases, they can meaningfully improve their ability to truly understand a patient's life and healthcare concerns, putting themselves on the path to accurate diagnoses and successful treatment plans.

Far-ranging gaps in cultural competency significantly threaten quality care for marginalized and

minority patients. Often these patients encounter stigma, misdiagnosis and trauma due to cultural misunderstandings. While a patient's ethnicity, heritage and age may be vastly different from the practitioner, medical professionals are at-risk when they are blinded by their own backgrounds and beliefs and succumb to stereotyping.

As demographics for both patients and healthcare providers in the United States shift from western European traditions, our healing communities and those whom they serve are more diverse than ever. Biases can spring from professionals' and patients' diverse ethnicity, gender identification, generational, racial and religious backgrounds. A strong commitment to making cultural competency a priority is essential to bridge today's healthcare disparity.

Empowered with accurate knowledge of each patient's current healthcare challenges and concerns—understood in the context of their experiences since infancy shared through personal stories and influenced by myriad factors—can make possible a life-altering difference for diagnoses and outcomes. This kind of insightful delivery of healthcare also meets legislative, regulatory and accreditation mandates.

Why is cultural competency particularly important in healthcare?

The delivery of healthcare without cultural competency has serious consequences. The lack of cultural competency in the United States can lead to:

- Unequal treatment
- Care-based ethnic, gender, racial or religious biases and hierarchies
- Ostracism
- Patients' misunderstanding of treatment plans and ability to adhere to them
- Inaccurate diagnoses
- Language and communication barriers
- Inaccurate and over medication
- Patient dissatisfaction



The National Center of Cultural Competence lists these goals for healthcare providers to:

- Eliminate the healthcare disparity gaps for people of diverse ethnic, racial and cultural backgrounds
- Improve the quality of services and healthcare outcomes
- Meet legislative, regulatory and accreditation mandates
- Gain a competitive edge in the marketplace
- Decrease the likelihood of liability and malpractice claims

How can cultural miscommunication negatively affect healthcare outcomes?

Here is an example: If a patient speaks only Spanish and the healthcare provider speaks very little Spanish and a Spanish-speaking interpreter is not hired to assist, the healthcare professional may not be able to learn an accurate medical history and a patient's description of a current medical situation or complaint.

Such lack of clear communication could render an incorrect diagnosis and lead to the wrong treatment. Also, the patient may not consent to a treatment plan because barriers to communication can lead to mistrust.

How can medical professionals take practical steps to improve their cultural competency?

There are a number of practical steps that medical professionals need to take to become more culturally competent:

- Build awareness. The process of practitioners acknowledging cultural differences and understanding the importance of these differences.
- Embrace critical self-awareness. Healthcare providers need to build awareness of their own cultural influences, biases and experiences that affect their own perspective and sustain this process for continued professional growth.

- Respect Identity. Identity has many dimensions including race, gender identification, disability, heritage, religious beliefs and culture. Practitioners must acknowledge these intersecting identities without judgement.
- Develop knowledge. Knowing the characteristics and complexities of a patient's specific cultural group is essential to effective treatment.
- Hone communication skills. Language and culture extend beyond the spoken word. Being able to understand the language patterns of patients, including nonverbal behaviors and elements of expressiveness like volume, tone, pitch and silence build a deeper understanding of patients.
- Understand with empathy. Healthcare practitioners must use empathy to avoid stereotypes but still acknowledge patients' important cultural factors while avoiding stereotypes.

Why is cultural competency even more important today?

According to demographics provided by the Pew Research Center, people of color will be a majority in the United States by 2050. At that time, projections show that the population will be 47 percent white, 29 percent Hispanic, 13 percent Black and nine percent Asian¹.

Additionally, the Pew Research Center estimates that one in five Americans will be foreign-born. Other estimates suggest even people of color will be more dominant, some estimates predict they will comprise 66 to 78 percent of the population.

Cultural competency is essential to understanding our communities and caring for everyone living in the United States.

¹ This projection does not include Native Americans or Alaskan Native