

# medicine

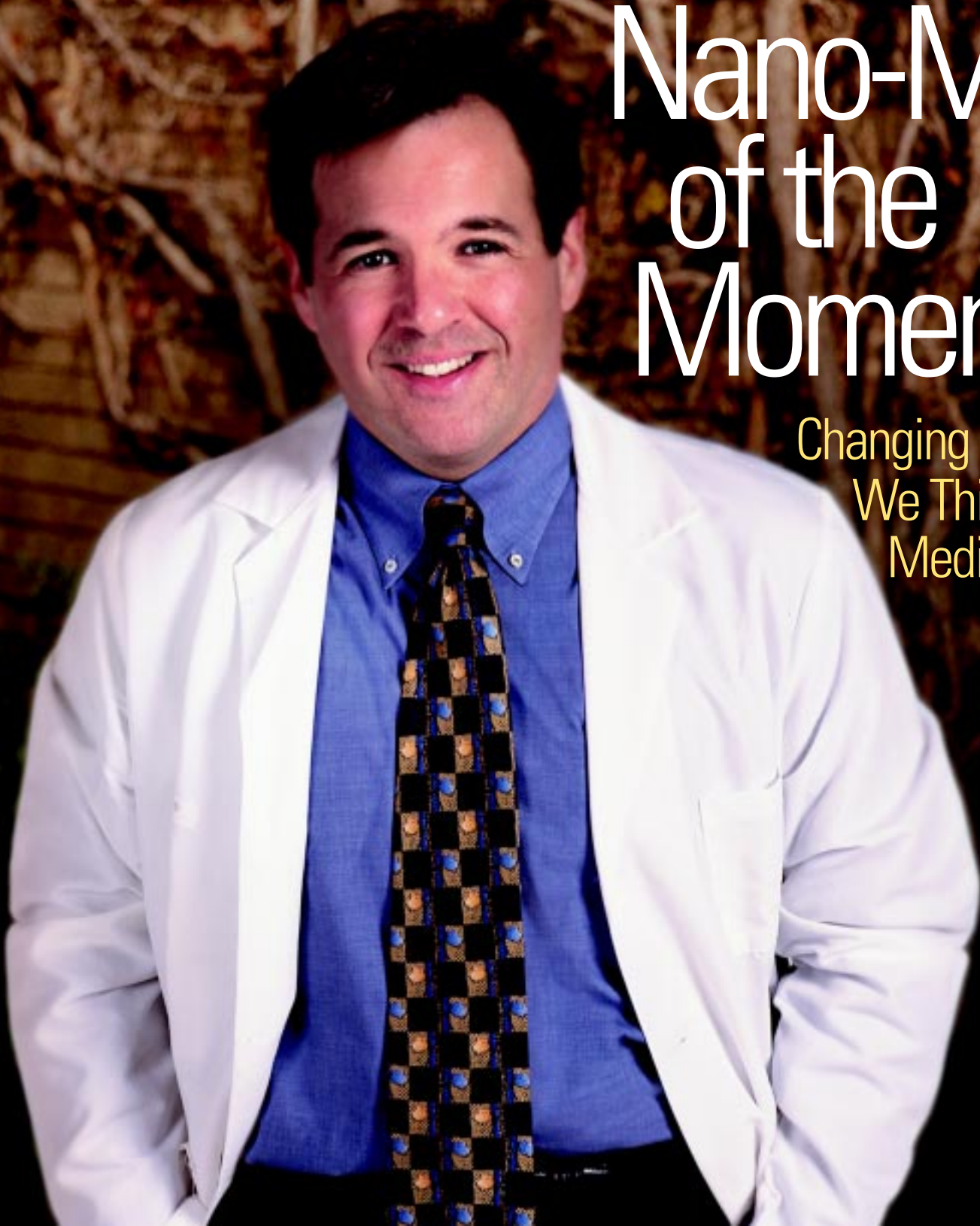
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## Nano-Man of the Moment

Changing the Way  
We Think About  
Medicine





# Healing a Nation:

How Three Graduates of the U-M Medical School  
Wrote Their Own Chapter in the History  
of Civil Rights in America

by **David Barton Smith, Ph.D.**



The photo at left, under the heading, "Physician-Pickets Demand Racial Equality in A.M.A." appeared in the Thursday, June 20, 1963, issue of the *New York Times*. John L.S. Holloman Jr. (M.D. 1943) is pictured on the right, leading the pickets in Atlantic City in front of the Traymore Hotel, where the American Medical Association's House of Delegates was meeting. Behind Holloman are Robert Smith, M.D., of Jackson, Mississippi, and Walter J. Lear, M.D., of New York. It would be another 22 years before an African-American, Lonnie Bristow, M.D., was elected as a trustee of AMA; in 1995 he became the AMA's first African-American president.

The photo is courtesy of Patricia Holloman, who resides with her husband, now 80 years old, in Flushing, New York.

of internship was limited to the few historically black hospitals that provided such training, such as Lincoln Hospital in Durham, North Carolina, where he did his internship. Frustrated in his subsequent search for a surgical residency, Cornely returned to U-M and earned his doctorate in public health.

Obtaining a faculty position in public health at Howard University, he began a career dedicated to documenting racial disparities in health care in America and exploring strategies for their elimination. He teamed up with Howard colleague and anatomy professor W. Montague Cobb in orchestrating a protracted legal and political campaign against hospital segregation. He began publishing the results of surveys

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of segregated practices in the nation's hospitals and worked with Cobb in organizing a series of national conferences focused on ending hospital segregation.

Neither Howard University nor the Department of Health Education and Welfare dared provide space for them, fearful of the political backlash. Most conferences were held, instead, at a local church in Washington, D.C. The crusaders found encouragement in the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision, appearing as it did to nullify provisions in the 1946 Hill-Burton legislation permitting the use of federal funds for the construction of hospitals on a "separate but equal" basis. The conferences led to court challenges and eventually to federal legislation, including Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act that prohibits the allocation of any federal funds to any program or organization that discriminates on the basis of race.

A critical part of the story, however, involves **Hubert A. Eaton**, who graduated from the U-M Medical School in 1942. After leaving Michigan, Eaton returned to Wilmington, North Carolina, to assume his father-in-law's medical practice. By 1947 the practice was thriving and he had settled into a comfortable life style. He had his own tennis court next to his home, and continued to play championship-caliber tennis. Such was his interest in tennis that he and his family welcomed Althea Gibson in her teen years as a member of the Eaton household in preparation for her debut on the world tennis circuit. ➤

For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a quiet, largely private, and unheralded struggle was waged to end the division of patients and physicians in America's hospitals by race. Three of the lonely champions central to this struggle were graduates of the University of Michigan Medical School. Each played a distinctive and key role in assuring its success.

One was an academic physician familiar with the political maneuvering that goes on inside the Washington beltway. The second was a community leader and practicing physician in a rigidly segregated southern community. The third worked as an activist, organizing northern liberal support for the cause of racial equality in medicine. Together, their individual sagas form a larger story of the civil rights struggle in America that has been largely left untold. Yet, they accomplished some of the most significant and lasting changes of the civil rights era.

**Paul D. Cornely** graduated from the U-M Medical School in 1931. Like other black physicians, his choice

An incident in 1947, however, shifted Eaton's interests to other challenges. Called to testify in court concerning a liability case related to a patient, he suffered an indignity that was to change his life. The Bible he was to swear upon was switched awkwardly by the court clerk at the last minute,



replaced with a beat up copy covered in dirty adhesive tape labeled "Colored." It became a personal turning point for him and the beginning of a long, determined and often lonely battle to end racial discrimination.

Wilmington had two hospitals. One was a small substandard facility for blacks. The other, a more generously endowed facility, James Walker Memorial, maintained about 25 beds for black patients in a ward that had only two toilets and

was completely separate from the main hospital building. In order to reach the delivery room, oper-

**The transformation, under the threat of lost Medicare dollars, was remarkable. Almost 1,000 hospitals quietly and uneventfully ended segregated accommodations and discriminatory medical privileges, and the medical world was transformed.**

ating room or other diagnostic facilities, the black patient had to be wheeled or walked 30 yards across an open space. The medical staff didn't just deny black physician applications for privileges; the hospital actually had by-laws that restricted staff privileges to white physicians. Yet Walker Memorial paid no taxes and received public dollars for its support.

In 1954, Eaton, along with several other black physicians he had persuaded to join him, applied for privileges at Walker Memorial, with no illusions about the rejection that would, and did, follow. In March 1956, Eaton filed suit in U.S. Federal District Court, the first of its kind in the nation and a key test case, thus joining the hospital desegregation efforts supported by Cornely and his Howard colleagues. It took Eaton more than eight years, but in April 1964 he won a victory in the Federal Appeals Court. The case brought attention to the use of public funds in hospitals that discriminated against blacks and helped assure the passage of Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

It would now be up to **John L.S. Holloman Jr.** to bring to final fruition the struggle begun by his fellow alumni, the Howard professor and the black practitioner in the segregated medical community of Wilmington, North Carolina.

Holloman graduated from Michigan in 1943, the year after Eaton. He practiced in New York, eventually becoming an active member of the Medical Committee for Human Rights (MCHR). The group would shock the medical establishment by picketing the American Medical Association meetings in 1963 for its failure to bar medical societies that refused to accept black physicians as members. In 1965 he assumed the presidency of MCHR, which sent volunteer civil rights hospital inspectors into the South during the summer of 1965.

This hastily pulled together effort would serve as the blueprint for the Title VI Medicare certification process for the following year.



The group was frustrated by the federal inaction in addressing the clear violations they found in conducting their volunteer inspections. This culminated in a protest demonstration led by Holloman in the office of John Gardner, then secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, in December 1965. The pressure created by Holloman's group helped; the Title VI certification effort for Medicare that was to start in July 1966 became a deadly serious one rather than a paper compliance charade. Holloman would serve as a consultant to the Office of Equal Health Opportunity responsible for making sure that hospitals receiving Medicare funds did not have segregated accommodations and did not discriminate against physicians in terms of privileges on the basis of race. The transformation, under the threat of lost Medicare dollars, was remarkable. Almost 1,000 hospitals quietly and uneventfully ended segregated accommodations and discriminatory medical privileges, and the medical world was transformed. It was almost as if, as one black physician observed, "it had always been this way."

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The University of Michigan Medical School’s sesquicentennial year coincidentally marks the beginning of a national effort, Healthy People 2010. One of the key goals of this effort is the elimination of the remaining racial disparities in the U.S. in health use and outcomes by the year 2010. While clearly much remains to be done, the struggle waged by University of Michigan Medical School alumni Paul Cornely, Hubert Eaton and John Holloman Jr. did change the landscape of medical care in the United States forever. Three very different medical graduates worked as a team and won a remarkable victory. In the truest sense of the word, they each earned the title, “Champion,” that word so often embraced with enthusiasm in their alma mater’s fight song, *The Victors*. [m](#)



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Eaton v. Grubbs, 329 F.2d 710, 715 (1964).



### Author’s Note:

David Smith, who earned his Ph.D. from the University of Michigan School of Public Health in 1969, is currently professor and program director of the HealthCare Management Program at Temple University in Philadelphia. He is the author of *Health Care Divided: Race and Healing a Nation*, published by the U-M Press in 1999 and supported by a Robert Wood Johnson Health Policy Research Investigator Award. This article is based on his research for the book.

**The U-M Kellogg Project collects oral histories about segregated hospitals in southeastern Michigan; visit its Web site for additional information: [www.med.umich.edu/haahc](http://www.med.umich.edu/haahc).**