Background

Inequities in health are of great concern to medical practitioners, policymakers, and patients in this country. Impacted by provider, patient, and social behaviors; differences in health care access; interventions; and outcomes have resulted in disparities between various groups of people within the U.S. Although linked to patient health risk-behaviors, socioeconomic status, geographic location, and education level, no single variable can account for the inequities we see across a broad spectrum of diseases and medical procedures. Regardless, increasing awareness about this issue and competence of medical practitioners, including the critical domain of cultural competence, is essential to diminishing their presence.

Racial health disparities have emerged from a long history of prejudice and inequity that have existed not only in health care distribution and access, but social status and educational attainment, and were influenced by acts of discrimination and racism. In recent decades, this issue has increasingly garnered the attention of community members, health care providers, government agencies, and insurance payers because of the overall adverse consequences it has on health outcomes. In the mid 1980s, steps were taken to begin to evaluate the extent and impact of the problem of health disparities by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). This accelerating consciousness has provided a wealth of literature that supports the presence of disparities among races and ethnicities in the areas of health status, access to care, and health care quality (Gamble & Stone, 2006). Even with the overall decline in mortality throughout the 20th century, African American mortality rates remain 40% higher than the mortality rates of Non-Hispanic Whites (Smith, 2005). Infant mortality rates continue to be substantially greater among minorities (LaVeist, 2005). And finally, not only is there a difference between health measures with regard to race and ethnicity, but the differences continue to widen (Atrash & Hunter, 2005; Jatol, Becher, & Leake, 2003; LaVeist).