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About us

Research and programs

Resources



News and events

Meet Dr. Biftu Mengesha, fierce advocate for reproductive justice

There was a time when Dr. Biftu Mengesha thought her “nerdy obsession” with weather and science meant that her path to helping people would be as a meteorologist, providing urgent tornado warnings. Instead she turned to medicine. A revelatory experience as a medical student in a maternal-child hospital ward set her on the path to

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providing compassionate, patient-centered care as an Assistant Professor in the Bixby Center. “It was just the most spectacular thing to see a relationship between a provider and a woman and the amount of intimacy and trust and positivity in that relationship,” says Mengesha.

During residency, she became inspired to fight for equitable and compassionate sexual and reproductive health care for low-income women and women of color. Dr. Mengesha saw firsthand how patients with differential access to care had vastly different quality of care and health outcomes. She saw how low-income women and women of color faced more barriers in figuring out how to access desired care that they could afford. “It was really heartbreaking to see that these women didn’t have access to compassionate and dignified care. Because of the circumstances that our society has put these women in, they don’t get that same benefit as other women.”

Dr. Mengesha joined UCSF as a [family planning fellow](#), where she was able to collaborate closely with people she calls “giants in the field

of family planning.” Now as faculty, she is the Medical Director of Obstetrics for Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital (ZSFG), where she strives to constantly improve labor and delivery care. She also works at the hospital’s Women’s Options Center, which she affectionately calls a “magical place” that provides what she considers to be the best possible abortion and contraceptive care.

Improving racial equity is essential to providing the best possible care, and Dr. Mengesha is helping to lead the charge to confront and dismantle the institutional and structural forces that compromise patient care. She’s working with other leaders to organize equity training for 350 people who care for ZSFG’s Ob-Gyn patients. It’s a herculean task, but Dr. Mengesha has been buoyed by the overwhelmingly positive response from colleagues who are taking up the challenge to improve their care.

The reach of Dr. Mengesha’s work to advance racial equity in healthcare goes far beyond UCSF. She captured national attention with an [open letter by family planning fellows published in *Contraception*](#), calling for education on racial bias, providing trauma-informed care, embracing a reproductive justice framework, and diversifying the family planning workforce. She takes part in a

nationwide racial justice working group that is starting to address how to prioritize racial justice and equity within family planning on a broader scale. With [Innovating Education in Reproductive Health](#), she is helping to develop a video curriculum for healthcare providers that takes a deep dive into structural inequities, the legacies that contribute to those inequities, and ways providers can take action.

For all the ways that Dr. Mengesha goes above and beyond to fight for her patients and tackle some of the biggest challenges in healthcare today, she feels lucky to do this work and learn from role models at UCSF. She strives to be “someone is who is a fierce advocate for all women in terms of reproductive justice, and particularly black women, and someone who will always provide support and will be a champion for prioritizing this work in every fabric of what we do.” There is no doubt that she is living this philosophy, and her patients and colleagues alike benefit from her unwavering commitment to just, equitable health care.

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