Speaker 1:

Welcome to The Michigan Minds Podcast, a quick and informative analysis of today's top issues from University of Michigan faculty.

Speaker 2:

Thank you so much for joining Michigan Minds. I'm really looking forward to talking with you today and learning from you. So can you start by introducing yourself and sharing a little bit about your role at The University of Michigan?

Lisa Meeks:

Sure. Well, my name is Lisa Meeks, and I'm an assistant professor in the departments of learning health sciences and family medicine. But I also have the distinct pleasure and honor of serving on the admissions executive committee for the school of medicine, where I help select our incoming medical school classes.

Speaker 2:

Thank you. And in what areas does your research focus?

Lisa Meeks:

My work focuses on improving access to healthcare education and practice for people with disabilities.

Speaker 2:

As founder and director of the Doctors With Disabilities initiative, can you tell us a bit about the work of this organization and its mission?

Lisa Meeks:

Sure. The Docs With Disabilities initiative uses research, education, and the sharing of stories to drive change in perceptions, in disability policy, and in practices in healthcare education, and we have four main goals. So these include elevating people, one of the things we love to do is share the stories of physicians, nurses medical professionals, in their own words. We also work to foster awareness, which includes increasing the visibility of disabled healthcare providers. And part of our goal is to help build a community, this is both virtual and in person, a space for people to connect and to support one another in their journeys. And we do this mostly through our mentorship programs.

And then we also seek to impact inclusion, and this is achieved through our research, providing education that informs policy and practice, but mostly our organization addresses the inequity of opportunity and access in health professions education and practice for people with disabilities, and lack of education and awareness on the topic of disability inclusion. So we really work to combat stereotype, bias, and assumption through education and myth busting. And we assist healthcare organizations and associations, policy makers, and leaders, through our research, educational outreach, and policy briefs and recommendations.

Speaker 2:

Wonderful. Thank you. You recently spoke with Time Magazine in an article titled Doctors With Disabilities Push for Change as Long COVID Affects Their Workforce, that highlighted the push for the medical field to improve its treatment of disabled healthcare professionals, particularly as the number of people with long COVID who need accommodations at work has increased. Can you explain how long COVID is affecting healthcare professionals' ability to stay in their profession?

Lisa Meeks:

Sure. Long COVID has been described as pretty much our next national health disaster. And we know very little about how people are affected and how long these effects will last. But we can see really clearly that it could change the employment of individuals with disabilities that are currently working as healthcare workers. So we need to be really cognizant of what will happen as people with disabilities that are healthcare workers start to live this new normal as they start to navigate their employment and their contribution as people that may have disabilities. As I said before, one of the ways that we work to improve the climate for people is by absolutely making sure that employers, educators, understand how to accommodate individuals with disabilities when accommodations are reasonable and appropriate, and how to revamp the way that perhaps people used to do things. This is a real area that will be growing and we'll have an incredible need to inform especially hospital systems and employers about how individuals that have long COVID that are healthcare workers can continue to contribute to the healthcare workforce in meaningful and effective ways.

Speaker 2:

Are there any ways in which the public can advocate for healthcare professionals with disabilities to support them in getting the assistance they need?

Lisa Meeks:

I think this is a great question, and one that I am almost never asked, so thank you so much for asking. But I think that there's kind of two prongs to this. As a society, we are ableist, period, end of discussion. We are an ableist society. And I think it's important for everyone to really reflect on the idea of ableism, what ableism is, how it is expressed in everyday kind of navigation and interactions with other people, and then to work on becoming actively anti ableist. So how do we work to disrupt the bias that we have within us? And then on the second part, it is really to, when they have an experience with a healthcare provider with a disability, to share that story, to share with us how having a healthcare provider with a disability has positively impacted their health care, their experience with healthcare, their trust of the healthcare system, their compliance with healthcare recommendations. All of that is really important for us to know, as not only as researchers, but as policy makers and advocates for more individuals with disabilities in the workforce.

Speaker 2:

Disability as Diversity is a book that you co-authored, described as a guidebook for inclusion in medicine, nursing, and the healthcare professions. Can you share a few key messages from this work?

Lisa Meeks:

Thank you so much for highlighting the book. I haven't had a chance to talk about this in such a long time. We have several books that our team has written on the topic, and each kind of has its own sort of audience. My affection for this book in particular is really grounded in two things. One is how the book is laid out, how we went about telling the story. We begin with an assessment of the current frameworks around disabilities. What are our belief systems? How do we work towards disability inclusion in medicine writ large? And the author, Dr. Neera Jain, talks about a transformative approach to disability inclusion in medicine. And it's just such an important chapter. This is quickly followed by a chapter on healthcare disparities for individuals with disabilities and how people with disabilities inform the workforce and the practice for patients with disabilities.

This is something that isn't really covered in a lot of the other textbooks. This really gets to the core about why this topic is so important. And it's written by Lisa Iezzoni, so somebody who's really well respected in this area and who's done a ton of work on the impact of physicians' belief systems on patient care for people with disabilities, so really well informed chapter and really important chapter to centering the reader on why this is critically important at this time. And then finally, there's another chapter that is really different in this book versus the others, and that is one that looks at intersectionality. This isn't something that's in the literature at great lengths, but it's critically important to our understanding of how disability impacts everyone. I think it's a unique chapter on a topic that deserves a lot more discussion.

I think the second part, I said there were two reasons why this book is incredibly important to me, it is informed by so many University of Michigan faculty. In fact, the foreword was written by now retired Dr. Philip Zazove, who was the chair of family medicine, and who was one of the first deaf physicians in the US. And then the introduction is written by Dr. Mangrulkar, who was at the time the associate dean for medical student education at The University of Michigan. Both of these really fearless leaders and champions for disability access kind of set the stage again for how the reader navigates this book, and really calls on people to think differently.

Speaker 2:

Thank you so much. Are there any resources you can share for healthcare workers with disabilities?

Lisa Meeks:

Sure. There's such a growing opportunity for support and community in this space, and so it makes me really proud to be able to talk about some of these resources. The first one that I'll talk about is The Society for Physicians with Disabilities, which is a subgroup of The Society for Healthcare Professionals with Disabilities. They've been around for quite a long time. It's a social enterprise that was developed to provide free resources and support for its members. And the mission of the society is to foster an online supportive community and to provide disability related resources and tools. And again, this is completely free. Another group, the Stanford Medicine Alliance for Disability Inclusion and Equity, or SMADIE, as they're called, is an advocacy group that aims to provide accessibility resources and policy for Stanford medicine, but also beyond Stanford medicine, dismantling systemic discrimination in medical education, in training, and in the medical education workforce.

And they have a pretty robust mentoring group. They have partnered with the Society for Physicians with Disabilities in providing this monthly mentoring group, where physicians with disabilities can come and talk with other people in the space and kind of crowd source resources that way. The other resource that I would be remiss if I didn't mention is our own Docs with Disabilities Podcast, which shares the stories of physicians with disabilities across multiple specialties and across those intersectional identities that are so important, as we just discussed. There are multiple other groups like AMPHL, The Association for Medical Professionals with Hearing Loss, that looks at the inclusion of individuals with deaf and hard of hearing throughout the healthcare workforce, and then of course, many other groups that are happening and robust in other countries.

Speaker 2:

Thank you so much for sharing that. As the podcast comes to a close, what is one thing you hope listeners remember from our conversation?

Lisa Meeks:

Yeah, there's a lot that we've discussed in such a short time, but I think most important to me is that physicians with disabilities are a valuable part of the fabric of medicine, both by providing empathic and informed care, and through the educational space by disrupting ableist stereotypes among their peers, and reframing disability as part of a diverse and important healthcare workforce.

Speaker 2:

Is there anything else you would like to share?

Lisa Meeks:

Well, I invite everyone to check out our podcast and our Docs with Disabilities initiative, which is at docswithdisabilities.org. But I also just want to take this time to really thank our team. We are so lucky to partner with many of the medical associations and to work on shared data and understanding of how best to approach disability inclusion, which of course impacts policy and procedure across all of the medical education space, but also just to thank all of the people that work on our team every day. We have a pretty robust team of about 12 investigators, and every single person brings such a wealth of information and experience to this work. Almost all of the people on our team are individuals with disabilities. Of course, we also have tons of allies and accomplices as well, and our team is informed by students and trainees and physicians with disabilities. So just a big shout out to the incredible work that's been happening in this space by this group. And of course, a big go blue.

Speaker 2:

Fantastic. Thank you so much. It has been an absolute honor to talk with you today and learn from you. Thank you for taking the time to join us.

Speaker 1:

Thank you for listening to The Michigan Minds Podcast, a production of The University of Michigan. Join the conversation on social media with hashtag U Mich Impact.