

Professional Groups Drop Race

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WHEN the Florida Medical Association opened its doors to Negro members recently, its action was regarded as news throughout the nation. It was news for the very simple reason that Florida is the first—and so far the only—Southern state in which Negro doctors are admitted to full membership in the state medical society.

In most Southern states, it is true, Negro doctors have their own organizations. The same is true in other fields. These all-Negro groups are not dealt with here, however, since they exist largely because of the exclusiveness of the dominant professional associations. Like so many of our "separate" institutions, they suffer limitations not shared by their white counterparts. Their membership is necessarily much smaller, their professional resources fewer, their prestige and influence unavoidably less. Under present conditions, they are necessary and useful, but the Negro professional person will continue to suffer disadvantages so long as he is denied membership in the major associations. And quite apart from the injury felt by trained, competent, sensitive people, the South as a whole is denied the benefits of free interchange of knowledge.

Doctors are not the only professional group to apply the color bar. Negro dentists may not join the dental association in any Southern state, and Negro teachers are excluded from even formal membership in the educational associations of all except Arkansas. In welcome contrast, the state social workers' associations are open to Negro members in all of the thirteen Southern states. Nurses' associations rank next, with eight out of thirteen open to Negroes. Lawyers admit qualified Negroes to membership in seven states, and librarians in six.

The situation is not as simple as this tabulation suggests. Even among the associations which officially admit Negroes, one can find various discriminatory practices. Few have a policy as unequivocal as that of the Alabama Bar Association, which admitted the first Negro lawyer to membership some 25 years ago; today it has seven Negro members who may attend all business meetings, receive all literature, and vote on all proposals. Most of the associations which fall short of these practices do so because of public or private regulations prescribing segregation. Some, for example, combine their business and "social" functions in such a way that Negro members are prevented from taking part. In others, Negroes are eligible for membership at the state level but are not admitted by the district or county organizations which make up the state body. A few are integrated only on paper, for they insist that Negro and white members meet separately and, in effect, conduct their business as two affiliated organizations.

Many of these groups have only recently opened membership to Negroes. As the practice comes to be accepted as a matter-of-course, it is hoped that the clumsier arrangements will disappear. Meanwhile, to illustrate the kinds of adjustments that have been and are being made, the following specific examples are offered.

The functions of the bar associations, and hence their membership policies, vary from state to state. The Georgia Bar Association, for example, is a purely private organization which may admit or exclude anybody it pleases, and performs only such professional services as its members wish. It does not accept Negro members. On the other hand, Virginia has what is known as an "integrated bar"—one which performs the dual role of private association and official agency. It issues licenses, hears complaints, and otherwise regulates the practice of law in the states. By its very nature, the Virginia State Bar could hardly restrict membership to one racial group, since every lawyer must be a member in order to practice. Membership eligibility must be determined by purely professional standards.

In addition to the State Bar, Virginia has two bar associations, one for whites and one for Negroes, which are largely "social" organizations. But that is not the general pattern. In Alabama, the single bar association *is* the integrated bar; and a move is under way in Oklahoma to transform the Oklahoma Bar Association (now limited to whites) into an integrated bar, in which case all practicing lawyers would become members.

The sole exception to the rule of separate associations for white and Negro teachers is a very recent one—and only a partial exception. Until April, 1950, as in the other Southern states, there were two such organizations in Arkansas—the Arkansas Education Association (white) and the Arkansas Teachers Association (Negro). The AEA at its 1950 convention amended its constitution to admit Negro members, but with the provision that the two groups "continue to meet separately." The ATA met a few days later and, after some debate, voted to accept the condition and become part of the AEA.

Although state dental associations uniformly restrict membership to whites, the arrangement in Alabama might be noted in passing. It is best described in the words of the secretary-treasurer of the Alabama Dental Association: "Negro dentists are not active members but are invited and admitted to scientific sessions, clinics, and exhibits at our state meetings. The Alabama Dental Association acts as a clearing house for forwarding the dues of the Negro dentists to the American Dental Association. We have been following this plan for a long time and there are about 35 Negro dentists who participate in it." Negro dentists in Tennessee, though they may not join the Tennessee Dental Association, are invited to participate in an annual seminar sponsored by it.

How many state medical associations will follow the lead of Florida in opening membership rolls to Negro physicians remains to be seen.* The Oklahoma Medical Association took a slight step in that direction only last month when it voted to invite Negro physicians to attend scientific sessions, beginning in 1951.

**Editor's note: As of June 1955, seven additional Southern state medical associations had opened full membership to Negro doctors and two others accepted them as "scientific" (non-voting) members.*

A requirement for admission is that the Negro doctors be recommended by the local medical society of the county in which they practice. Another condition is that the sessions shall be open to Negro doctors only "when they are held outside of local hotels."

Following the Florida action in April of this year, Alabama's Negro medical association voted to seek admittance for its members to the all-white county and state medical societies. Sponsors of the resolution pointed out that Negro doctors are handicapped by policies of exclusion. Membership in the American Medical Association is automatically closed to them, since the AMA requires membership in the state and county medical societies. This is a serious disability, for AMA membership is necessary for certification to the various specialty boards.

Nurses' associations admit Negroes to membership in eight Southern states,* but most of the district organizations are closed to them. The situation in Alabama is fairly typical. The *Birmingham News* reported in an editorial: "Early in November of this year (1949) in state convention the Alabama Nurses Association voted to admit Negro nurses to professional membership in the group. The officers at the state level were, for the most part, in favor of such action. But such vote did not commit each district's membership. Thus it is possible—indeed, the condition has already come to pass—that one district may abide by the decision and another district simultaneously refuse to accept it." Of the fifteen districts in the state, only District One, in which Birmingham is located, is known to have voted favorably on the admission of Negro nurses.

Differential treatment has curtailed the participation of Negro nurses in association activities in at least a few states. One correspondent reports, for example, that in her state their attendance at state meetings "has been very limited because Negro nurses refuse to invite upon themselves the humiliation of being asked to use freight elevators in hotels where meetings are held."

The state library associations in Oklahoma and Virginia have been open to Negroes without restriction from the beginning. Negro librarians have participated fully in the Arkansas association for many years. In Texas, the library association has been open since 1938; in Kentucky, since 1946; and in Louisiana, since 1947. Membership in the Louisiana Library Association appears to be somewhat limited. According to a correspondent, Negroes pay dues, are on the membership roster, receive the literature, but have not attended meetings, since they are held at hotels which discourage Negro attendance.

By and large, social workers have led the field in making membership available on wholly professional grounds. It has already been pointed out that social workers are the only such group which admit Negroes to their organizations uniformly in the Southern states. (This applies to the state organizations only, not to all of the local chapters). Two of the charter members of the Tennessee association founded in 1932, were Negroes. The Texas Social Welfare Association, in which Negro social workers are fully integrated, some years ago adopted a policy of refusing to meet in any city where Negroes might be denied use of the facilities of the meeting place.

*Editor's note: As of January 1955, membership had been opened to Negro nurses in every Southern state except Georgia.