I distinctly remember that, as a young child, I used a brown marker to recolor my Band-Aid in order to make it blend more closely with my dark skin. It seemed suitable for it to look as natural and normal as it did on my white friends. The stark contrast between skin and bandage color I tried to correct actually originated in 1920 when Johnson & Johnson created the Band-Aid, an adhesive bandage available only in a peachy beige “flesh” color. This Band-Aid soon became a necessary element for healing wounds, cuts, and scrapes and nearly a universal symbol of medicine. Unknowingly, Johnson and Johnson had set a normative standard for the next century for all adhesive bandages in medicine, from birth control and nicotine patches to nasal strips.

Since the birth of the Band-Aid, advertising has featured people pledging allegiance to their brand. In one commercial, four “wounded” child actors gleefully sang about the Band-Aid brand. As the Black child sang joyously while her mother bathes her, the observant viewer notices how striking the beige bandage is on her dark brown arm compared to the bandages on the white children.

In the 1920s, creating a bandage suitable for black or brown skin was not seriously considered. Even forty years later, amidst the US civil rights movement and increased public consciousness of racism, corporations differed in their consideration of these issues. Johnson and Johnson, recognizing that the largest market was white Americans, decided that the “flesh color” of its original
Band-Aid was a “non-issue.” By contrast, Crayola, changed the name of their “flesh” crayon to “peach” in 1962. It signified an acknowledgment of the impact of exclusivity in early childhood. In subsequent years, they created 16 “multicultural” crayons (1992), and with help from a diversity and inclusion officer and a global skin tone consultant expanded to 24 “colors of the world” (2020).

In response to the indifference of Johnson and Johnson, a series of companies began to respond to the need for skin-colored bandages for children and adults with Black skin. In the 1970s, Soul-Aid bandages, in a rich natural brown tone, were advertised in the print media with the slogan “finally someone thought of you.” This product was available only by mail order and failed to survive the competitive bandage market. In 1998, Ebon-Aide was created in response to the same desire to create a more inclusive environment of healing. Unfortunately, retailers were slow to accept the product, claiming to be unsure about how to place it on their grocery store and pharmacy shelves. In 2005, BandShades, created clear bandages with a pigmented sterile pad in five skin tones, and made these available online. According to the founders, this product was created in response to the plea of a wounded child who felt left out, and a promise from an adult to make it better. Additional companies have subsequently emerged, including Nuditone, Browndages, and Urban Armour.

In the first-aid tape and bandage market in 2019, 3M earned $81.6 million or 10.2% and Johnson & Johnson earned $301 million or 38% of the market earnings. They are now surpassed by the private label brand category that earned $381 million dollars or 48% of the market.

My memory of coloring my Band-Aid as a kid was suppressed, the same fate of many racially exclusive experiences over decades, until 2018 when I had a wound in the middle of my face around the holidays. I needed to heal, and I wanted to protect my skin discreetly. I remembered seeing a social media post for a brown bandage brand named Tru-Colour a few months prior. I immediately purchased them so that I could leave the surgeons office with bandages that matched my skin tone. According to its creators, Tru-Colour, like BandShades, was born from the pleas of a Black child who wanted a bandage that made him feel less alienated and more included. Tru-Colour aims to promote “diversity in healing” and its website features photos of people with luminous brown skin and well-camouflaged brown bandages. Having these bandages probably meant more to me now than it did before and made me feel accepted when I had forgotten that I once felt left out.

By 2044, persons of color will represent over half the US population. The US Census Bureau projects that by 2060, the US will be 31% Hispanic, 15% Black and 8.2% Asian. Today, while the peachy “flesh-colored” shade has slightly tanned, the average bandage is still far from being camouflageable on many skin tones. Billions of people are consumers in a market where the business model and product design originated in an era that is drastically different from what it is today. The same light beige bandages that are supplied in Wisconsin are supplied in Guatemala and Mozambique. The websites of both Johnson & Johnson and 3M still feature mostly people whose light skin color closely matches their products.

One hundred years ago, Johnson & Johnson was a pioneer in the field. One hundred years ago, they set an industry standard by creating, exporting, and upholding a normative cue. One hundred years after its inception, Johnson and Johnson continued to ignore the voiced need of consumers with skin of color. They have produced over 100 billion Band-Aids that feature the most popular cartoon characters and superheroes of the cultural moment. It is uncertain whether the clear bandages by Johnson and Johnson and 3M represented a concession to the skin of color market, but, even in that case, speaks more to a form of “color blindness” than a real recognition of the diverse needs of their consumers.

What role does medicine have in considering one of its most recognizable symbols? Dermatologists are stewards of the skin and healers of open wounds, so it might be perplexing that this movement did not come from this field of medicine. The act of healing is a uniquely humanizing experience ubiquitously symbolized by the application of a bandage, an action that occurs daily in dermatology clinics after biopsies and pediatric clinics after vaccinations. But when we consider the fact that only 3% of dermatologists are Black and 4% are Hispanic, it seems slightly more plausible that this would be a blind spot unless expressed by our patients or physicians in the field. In addition to the impact a lack of diversity has on the quality and access to care, lack of education about racism, implicit and explicit bias of providers with white skin and failure to communicate effectively have a greater impact than an assortment of bandages. Diversity at the proverbial table can result in more inclusivity, innovation, and attentiveness to understanding and dismantling institutional racism embedded in medicine and society.

Nevertheless, in the process of writing this manuscript this feeling of inclusion went viral on Twitter and was featured on international news. Tru-Colour bandages significantly impacted the life of one 45-year-old man who shared his emotional experience on Twitter. Dominque Apollon wrote: “It’s taken me 45 trips around the sun, but for the first time in my life I know what it feels like to have a ‘band-aid’ in my own skin tone. You can barely even spot it in the first image. For real, I’m holding back tears. This felt like belonging. Like feeling valued. Sadness for my younger self and millions of kids of color, esp. black kids. Like a reminder of countless spaces where my skin is still not welcomed. Feared. Hated. Like, ‘Why am I really thinking all this ‘bout an effing band-aid?’”.

In response to the overwhelming global demonstration of solidarity with this feeling of being seen, Tesco, a major retail store in the UK, would later announce the launch of new bandages in various shades of brown. Their tagline: “It’s about bloody time.” When I think back to the original commercial, I wonder if the young girl in the bathtub singing the jingle ever wondered why it stood out more on her but was more camouflaged on the other actors in the commercial.

The bandage may seem insignificant, but it is an external symbol of what we have come to expect and accept regarding race-based instruments in medicine. Race-corrected total lung capacity...
measurements\textsuperscript{13} and glomerular filtration rate\textsuperscript{14} are just a few examples that clinicians and patients can see of institutionalized racism in medicine. These norms must be challenged and reconsidered.

As the field of dermatology and the nation change and adapt, one to reflect the other, my hope as a future dermatologist of color is that we will continue to see products like Tru-Colour stick around. From the medical perspective, dermatologists are in a unique position to step away from this normative cue and decolonize healing spaces with a simple yet powerful gesture that shows patients they are seen and not deviations from the norm. I encourage dermatology to value and advocate for this inclusivity.

In the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement and the rapid reactionary awareness of institutionalized racism and swift statements of solidarity from institutions, Johnson & Johnson finally pledged to create brown bandages.\textsuperscript{15} It remains to be seen if their supply chain will be fully utilized to make them easily available both now and in the future.

I look forward to stocking my future skin of color and pediatric dermatology practice with an array of bandages so that my patients can heal discretely and confidently. It’s not a bandage for institutional racism, but it is indeed remarkable that a bandage can make people feel seen—because equity in healing is significant.

ETHICAL APPROVAL AND INFORMED CONSENT

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