

The CROWN act and dermatology: Taking a stand against race-based hair discrimination



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Race-based hair discrimination continues to disadvantage people of color who have been sent home from school or dismissed from their jobs on the premise that certain hairstyles, such as dreadlocks and knots, do not meet standards of professionalism. The Create a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair (CROWN) Act, which was recently passed by several states and the House of Representatives, prohibits such discrimination based on a person's hair texture or hairstyle associated with race. Dermatologists serve a vital role in advocating for the skin and hair needs of all patients, spanning from the personal or clinical encounters level to population-level policy legislation. The act represents a critical opportunity for dermatologists to coalesce and support this important piece of legislation that defends skin of color and the fundamental human right to nondiscrimination. (*J Am Acad Dermatol* 2021;84:1181-2.)

Key words: advocacy; CROWN Act; diversity; hair; policy; racial disparities.

Race-based hair discrimination continues to disadvantage people of color who have been sent home from school or dismissed from their jobs on the premise that certain hairstyles, such as dreadlocks and knots, do not meet standards of professionalism.^{1,2} Black women are 1.5 times more likely to be sent home from work than White women owing to their hair appearance, with up to 80% needing to change their hair to match office culture standards.³ The Create a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair (CROWN) Act, which “ensures protection against discrimination based on race-based hairstyles by extending statutory protection to hair texture and protective styles such as braids, locks, twists, and knots in the workplace and public schools,” was proposed to reduce such acts of discrimination, maintaining that hair is a critical extension of racial identity.⁴ As of October 2020, the CROWN Act bill had been passed by 7 states and the House of Representatives and was being considered in the US Senate. However, its widespread success depends on additional support from allies,

Abbreviation used:

CROWN: Create a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair

especially given the underrepresentation of people of color in legislative bodies.

It is essential dermatologists coalesce and support the CROWN Act for multiple reasons. First, it protects hair health for patients of color because societal pressures may contribute to hair straightening (through hot combing and chemical relaxants, which can damage hair) or to use of hair products containing estrogen or compounds associated with systemic health risks. Second, it is our professional duty as skin and hair expert physicians to educate the public by normalizing hair of all styles and textures. We must raise awareness that hair-based discrimination does not keep a workplace professional, but instead keeps people of color out of professional workplaces. Third, we have a moral obligation to address the inequities in our own field. In dermatology, Black

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patients are less likely to receive care, and they face worse outcomes and report lack of provider knowledge of the care of Black skin and hair.⁵ The importance of advocacy through legislation to address these disparities has remained underdiscussed. Supporting the CROWN Act would demonstrate allyship and empathy for our Black patients and other patients of color, helping to build the trust of a patient population often left behind in dermatology.

Dermatologists can take action to support the CROWN Act in several meaningful ways. We can sign petitions, send letters of support to elected representatives, and join the CROWN Coalition, an alliance of advocacy and nongovernmental organizations advancing antihair-discrimination legislation. We can raise awareness and educate the public through social media and vocalize against hair discrimination in our own workplaces and communities. Finally, we must ask our patients about their experiences with hair discrimination to better understand their multifaceted social determinants of health.

Ultimately, dermatologists must support the CROWN Act to advocate for our patients' rights to

equal opportunities and the freedom to wear their natural hair in a way that promotes their health and celebrates their unique identity.

Conflicts of interest

None disclosed.

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