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Kelleen Maluski
Student Success and Engagement Librarian
Health Sciences Library & Informatics Center, University of New Mexico
camaluski@salud.unm.edu

Aidy Weeks
Director, School of Medicine Library
University of Nevada–Las Vegas (UNLV) Health Sciences Library
aidybert.weeks@unlv.edu

Dear Ms. Maluski and Ms. Weeks:

Thank you for your June 11, 2022, correspondence regarding the National Library of Medicine's Medical Subject Headings (MeSH®). We appreciate the concerns you raise about terms related to marginalized groups in the 2022 edition of MeSH and the process by which changes are made to MeSH. NLM takes these matters seriously and values the input of stakeholders like you in helping us update MeSH in a manner that improves access to information while being inclusive and respectful.

In considering concerns such as those highlighted in your letter, we are mindful that MeSH is designed to facilitate discovery of literature as it is published over time. MeSH descriptors must therefore be reflective of terminology used in scientific studies with history and scope notes that aid in understanding how to search across timelines as terminology changes to ensure comprehensive literature search results.

In 2022, NLM modified MeSH terms related to population groups to better align with standards for race and ethnicity promulgated by the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) for use across Federal agencies and adopted by the National Institutes of Health. These terms provide a common language to promote consistency and comparability of data by race and ethnicity across Federal agencies.

We recognize that changing these standard terms and associated scope notes created unintentional results. We are interested in better understanding these concerns and working with our stakeholders to develop potential solutions. To that end, we have organized a special session of NLM Office Hours on Thursday, June 30, 2:00pm-3:00pm ET. We invite you to join us at this forum to discuss ideas that will allow us to be consistent in applying Federal standards that guide MeSH while remaining inclusive and respectful.

This listening session is part of a broader NLM effort to end structural racism and promote racial equity and inclusion at NIH and within the larger biomedical research enterprise. NLM has engaged with the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities and the NIH Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research to evaluate and, where needed, modify MeSH terms that perpetuate systemic bias. Also, as part of the NIH UNITE Initiative, NLM has begun assessing MeSH (and other products) through a racial and ethnic equity lens (REEL) framework.

We welcome your continued feedback on our efforts through stakeholder engagement opportunities made available through NLM and the Network of the National Library of Medicine (NNLM). We value your engagement and are listening to your input.

Sincerely,

Dianne Babski, MIM
Associate Director, Library Operations
National Library of Medicine