Michael M. Karl Oral History

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Biography

Dr. Michael Karl was born in 1915 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and received his M.D. from the University of Louisville in 1938. Karl joined the faculty of Washington University's department of medicine in 1941, where he was widely viewed as an outstanding teacher. He was named director of clinical affairs in the Department of Medicine in 1987. He was also a member of the clinical faculty at Barnes Hospital and in the early 1960s he successfully led the movement to eliminate the all-Black wards, 0300 and 0400.

Karl was one of few general internists to become a member of the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences. He was a master of the American College of Physicians (ACP), governor of the ACP for the State of Missouri and received the ACP Laureate Award in 1988. President Jimmy Carter appointed Karl to the national advisory committee of the White House Conference on the Family from 1978-1980, where he was among the first to call for family leave protections for working parents. He also worked for the establishment of national health insurance for all people regardless of their capacity to pay. In St. Louis, he was the co-organizer of one of the first health services for the poor, the Jeff-Vander-Lou Medical Clinic.
Dr. Karl, we would first like to ask you what you can remember about the desegregation of Barnes Hospital and the elimination of the 0400 ward.

Let me tell you about the medical situation in general in the St. Louis area. As you know, we had two city hospitals, Homer G. Phillips Hospital, where the Blacks were hospitalized, and the Starkloff City Hospital [Max C. Starkloff Memorial Hospital, St. Louis City Hospital No. 1] down on the south side, where the white patients were hospitalized. These existed when I came to St. Louis in 1938. I first came to Barnes Hospital in 1942 and was gone for World War II until 1946. When I came back, segregation was still present in Barnes Hospital. To my knowledge, there were no Black patients admitted to Barnes Hospital. The only Black patients who were admitted came in on what was then referred to as our ward service, which was our charity service. There were two wards, 0400 and 0300. Both were in the rear of Barnes Hospital, 0300 on the ground floor and 0400 on the first floor. That was the situation that existed when I came back in 1946.

*What was your involvement in the desegregation of those two wards?*

In the very early 60s there was movement among the full-time faculty for desegregation. At that time, much of the activity was being carried on by the full-time members of the faculty here. Some part-time people were also involved. My contact at that time was as a practicing physician who admitted patients to Barnes Hospital. There was a great deal of ferment about desegregation, but I was familiar only with the people in the department of medicine who were active in this area. Of that group I think there are only two remaining: Dr. David Kipnis and Dr.
William Daughaday. Their activities consisted of educating the full-time people primarily and trying to get the university to take a position officially in this area. I am not clear whether the university did or did not take an official position, but I can tell you that because of these activities, Barnes Hospital was integrated some time in 1962, as I recall.

Were there any Black nurses on the Black wards?

Oh, yes. There were Black nurses on the Black wards. The charge nurses, the head nurses, were white nurses. The Black nurses were on these floors.

How did these wards differ from the white wards?

I don’t think basically that there were any differences. They were not located as well in that the white wards were at the front of the hospital and the Black wards were at the back of the hospital. As far as the structural setup is concerned, they were very similar. In those days, the wards consisted of one large room with the patients partitioned off by curtains. That was the situation on the white wards as well as the Black wards.

Were all departments allowed to admit patients there or were they separated?

These were the medical wards and I did not have any contact with the other services, so I can’t give you any information about the others.
Can you name any important people who were involved in the desegregation?

Yes. The chairman of the board of Barnes Hospital at that time was Mr. Edgar Queeny. As I recall, he became chairman of the board in 1960. He, of course, as chairman of the board would necessarily have to take an action in this direction. The administrator of the hospital at that time was Dr. Frank Bradley, whose son is a surgeon here in St. Louis. He may have some information about Dr. Bradley’s role.

From our other interviews we learned that it was mainly the hospital boards that were preventing the hospitals from being desegregated and that it was not so much the attitudes of the physicians, but the hospital boards. What do you think about that?

I think that is true. I think the board wanted to maintain the status quo. I don’t think they had any philosophic strong feelings about the issue, but I think that like anything else in the medical field, they were much more conservative and moved a little more slowly. We are talking about activities that began in 1960. While I can’t be certain about the dates, I think that 0300 and 0400 were done away with in 1962.

Was there ever any opposition to desegregation?

No, I never recall any organized opposition. If there was opposition it was not vocal and I think that whatever resistance there was represented conservatism and the fact that it takes time to get things done in a bureaucracy like ours.
Do you have anything else to add on the situation of Black medical care at that time at Homer G. Phillips Hospital?

I think that Black medical care at Barnes Hospital was the best in the city. I know that it was better than what was afforded at Homer Phillips, because our staff went there as attending physicians. I myself never went there, but I talked to many of the physicians who did and I think that care at Barnes Hospital was greatly above the level that was generally available in St. Louis at that time.

After the desegregation of the hospital were there Black physicians who were able to come here and treat patients or were there Black physicians before then?

There was at least one ophthalmologist on the staff at that time. I think that in medicine we added several Black physicians. I am not clear about when they came on staff but I remember an internist by the name of Dr. Eugene Williams, who is now dead. Most of the Black physicians who were on the staff are no longer alive.

Is there anything else you would like to add about this subject?

When this took place I was president of the Barnes Hospital Society, which is the staff organization. At that time the Barnes Hospital Society was heartily in accord with desegregation and had been pushing in this direction for some time. In that position, I consulted with Mr.
Queeny, chairman of the board, who readily agreed that it was time to desegregate and did so promptly.