

October 11, 2018

Accuracy in Diversity Terminology: Asian

Omer A. Ilahi

Orthopedic Surgeon

Texas Arthroscopy and Sports Medicine Institute

I thank Dr. Zuckerman for his recent article on the importance of diversity in orthopedic surgery. He presented a cogent and heartfelt summary of the benefits of diversity and our need to foster it. I especially appreciated the historical context Dr. Zuckerman provided. Going further, I would like to know whether the data he presented on Asian-Americans in orthopaedic surgery really includes all Asians, or whether that information pertains only to those of East Asian ethnicity.

Personally, despite having been born in South Asia, and being able to communicate in more than one Asian language, I have found since entering medical school that all too often the term “Asian” is used in a way that does not apply to me. That begs the question: Is a single term adequate to describe people from the largest, most populous, and most diverse continent on the planet?

If not, what sense does it make to use a term that refers to all people from Asia when intending to refer only to those from East Asia? Furthermore, is it fair or prudent to exclude approximately 2.2 billion souls – half the continent’s population and more than a quarter of the entire world’s population – when speaking/researching about “Asians”? (1)

I would hope the inertia in our field is not so strong as to allow the term “Asian” to continue to be misleading at best and misused at worst. Is it too much to ask our journals, other publications, leaders, and colleagues to be more specific by adding just one additional word when speaking of Asians? I wouldn’t think it difficult to use terms such as “East Asian,” “South Asian,” and “Central Asian,” when not intending to refer to all Asians. Hopefully, I’m not alone in that regard.

References

1. World population prospects. The 2017 revision. Volume I: Comprehensive Tables. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. New York, 2017. https://population.un.org/wpp/Publications/Files/WPP2017_Volume-I_Comprehensive-Tables.pdf

Conflict of Interest: None Declared

Article Author Response

11 October 2018

Article Author(s) to Letter Writer(s)

I thank Dr. Ilahi for his letter about my article on “Diversity in Orthopedic Surgery.” He raises an interesting question, which really speaks to the issue of being able to appreciate the experience of other groups. The point is that the term “Asian” encompasses diverse groups of people, so why not subdivide it into more specific components because each segment has its own identity.

That is certainly true, but one wonders whether our efforts to document the level of diversity in orthopedic surgery is better served using this broader category or using smaller-group terminology. For now, the broader category seems to be effective enough, but going forward, I expect that will change, as Dr. Ilahi is encouraging. Diversity in orthopaedics is clearly a work in progress, and time will tell whether we can effectively achieve what I believe are the important goals in this area.