

IN SEARCH OF A CURE TO RACIAL IMBALANCE IN CANADA’S HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

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Throughout the vast and varied history of Canada, African Canadians have played a large role in shaping Canada’s culture and legacy. Despite facing inhumane discrimination along the way, Black Canadians have gained momentous prominence in the fields of politics, law, education, arts, athletics and more. As someone who is passionate about the field of medicine, I was inspired by Dr. Anderson Ruffin Abbott; the first Canadian born black physician and his contributions.

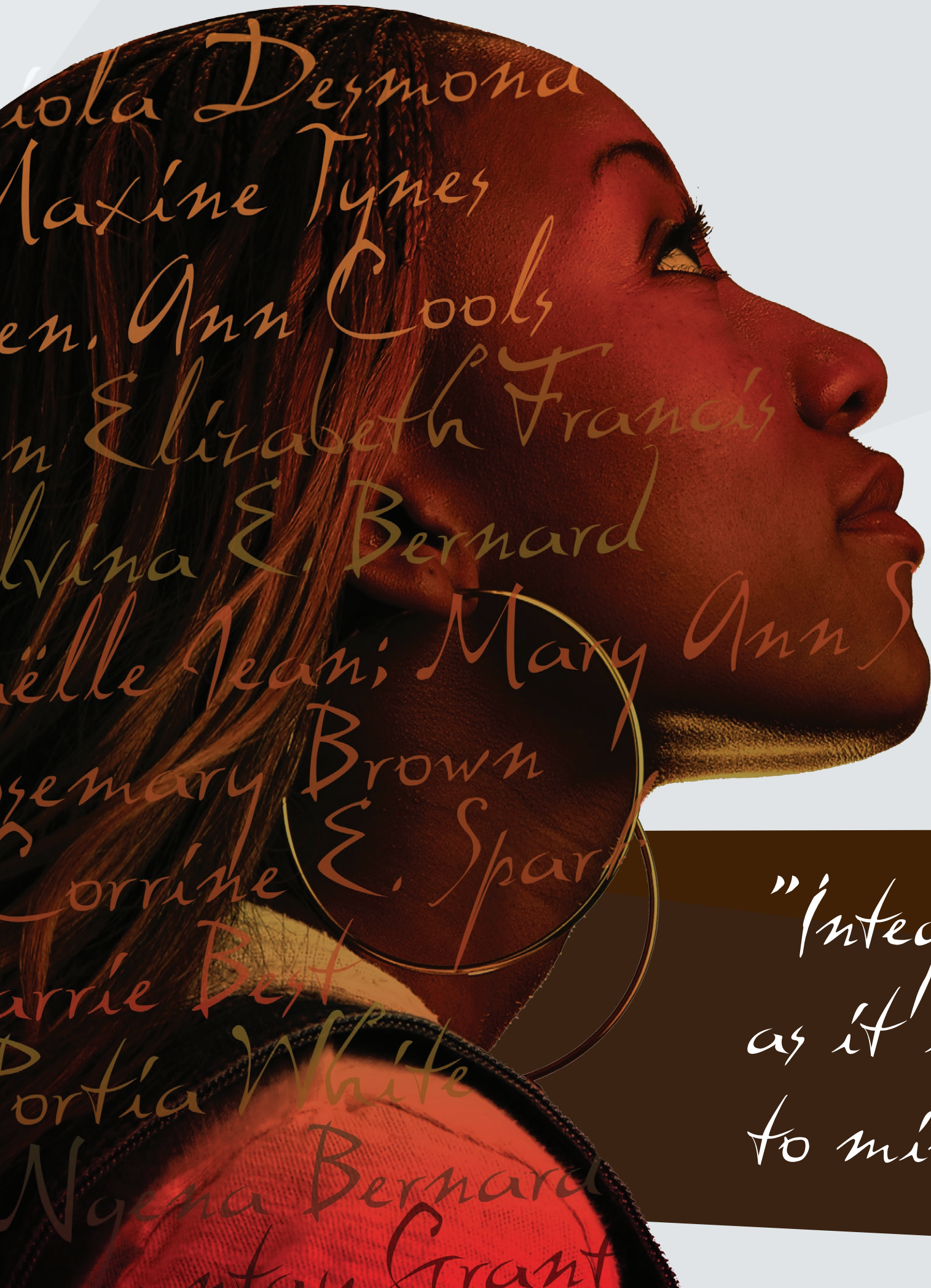
Anderson Ruffin Abbott is hailed for being the first Canadian born black physician in Canada. Abbott was born into an upscale, free black family in Toronto, Ontario on April 7th 1837. His family’s affluence allowed him to receive a top quality education, which was a rarity for many African Canadians of that era. Abbott’s strong resolve to become a doctor led him to study at the Toronto School of Medicine. In 1861 he officially became the first Canadian born black doctor.

As a black man of his time going against the social norm, Dr. Abbott faced barbaric racism in his endeavours in medicine; however, he prevailed as an inspirational example of courage and resolve. When the American Civil War broke out he felt a responsibility to offer his services, but was denied a position as a surgeon and was instead able to help by being a “medical cadet” in the coloured regiment. Later he was promoted to a contracted civilian surgeon and served in the United States until 1866. President Abraham Lincoln recognized Dr. Abbot’s efforts and desire to create a more equal society and he was one of a select group to stand vigil at the dying president’s side.

Upon his return to Canada, Dr. Abbott practiced throughout Ontario, while continually aiding in the fight against racism. He was especially instrumental in advocating against racially segregated schools. Abbott continually demonstrated an incomparable dedication to medicine and community wherever he resided. The following quote is very demonstrative of his attitude that was the basis of his many accomplishments: “Integration is just as natural for two races living together on the same soil to blend as it is for the waters of two river tributaries to mingle.”

Although I naively assumed that Dr. Abbott and the next few black Canadians to go into medicine would nobly break down all barriers preventing black Canadians from integrating into more health-care positions, I now understand that there is still much more to be done. I sought out the insight from a practicing black physician, Dr. Chadwick Williams who is originally from Preston, NS, which is the oldest and largest indigenous Black community in Canada. He illustrated that there are still serious factors limiting more black Canadians from going into medicine. Dr. Williams explained that the lack of physicians from Canada’s indigenous black communities has been somewhat cyclic in that it is difficult for youth to aspire to professions which they do not see as a reality in their environment. Therefore, in order to increase the number of black Canadians working in the medical field, it is imperative that black Canadian youth have more exposure to Canadian physicians of African descent.

This is one of the reasons Dr. Anderson Ruffin Abbott, along with other black medical professionals who are dedicated to improving Canadian society through their work, should be more widely known. These admirable Canadians may not all be known by name to us, but all are materially shaping Canada’s culture in medicine through their efforts. Dr. Williams expressed that “If you work hard and apply yourself, people genuinely respect it. This leaves little room for discrimination.” This perseverance and passion exemplified through the hopes and dreams realized by Dr. Abbott and other black professionals serves as a source of inspiration to me as an aspiring doctor. Their incredible level of dedication and commitment to serving a diverse community is something I will strive to mirror through my own journey in medicine.



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