



PRESS RELEASE from the Sangamon County Medical Society

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
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**Sangamon County Medical Society Issues Apology to  
African American Physicians**  
*Prominent Physician Denied Membership in 1929*

Springfield – The Sangamon County Medical Society (SCMS) wishes to apologize for past actions that may have disenfranchised African American physicians in our community. The approaching 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Springfield’s Race Riot and the recent public apology issued by the nation’s leading physician organization, the American Medical Association (AMA), prompted the local medical society to re-examine its own history for any racial bias.

In the July 16, 2008, edition of the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*, the AMA reviewed past actions taken by organized medicine and officially apologized to African American physicians for barring them from membership. The article, entitled “African American Physicians and Organized Medicine, 1846-1968, Origins of a Racial Divide,” acknowledged the legacy of racial bias and segregation practiced by many state and local medical societies, and sanctioned by the AMA.

“The Sangamon County Medical Society feels it is appropriate that the AMA has sought to rectify these practices of exclusion that occurred in the distant past with this national apology. In reviewing our own history, we also wish to convey our apology for past actions that may have disenfranchised African American physicians. Unfortunately, we know of one particular instance where a prominent African American physician, Dr. Alonzo H. Kenniebrew, was denied membership in the Sangamon County Medical Society in 1929,” said Dr. Eric Bleyer, President of the SCMS.

“As we near the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Springfield’s Race Riot – August 14 – 15, 1908 – SCMS must also acknowledge our own legacy on race relations. It is important to note that in the *JAMA* article, it indicated that ‘after 1900, hospital privileges (for physicians) became closely linked to medical society membership.’

According to our historical records, as SCMS became more exclusive, it was able to convince the Springfield hospitals to restrict admitting privileges to those physicians who were members of the Society. When Dr. Kenniebrew could no longer admit patients, he applied for membership in late 1929. He was the first resident physician at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, and his patients included Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver. Dr. Kenniebrew was denied membership in the Sangamon County Medical Society when his application was ‘tabled’ in 1929, and again in 1934. Fortunately, history did not repeat itself in 1949 when Dr. Edwin A Lee, another prominent African American physician, applied for membership and was accepted into SCMS,” added Dr. Bleyer.

“The goal before us now is to create an atmosphere of openness and trust as we strive to move forward and ensure that SCMS remains a most tolerant and just professional organization that represents all physicians in Sangamon County, regardless of ethnic origin, gender or religion. Although this known past incident of discrimination is a most embarrassing one, we openly admit to this egregious mistake, and look to more of our progressive achievements in recent history. The Sangamon County Medical Society is very proud of the fact that we have had two Presidents of African American origin, Dr. Donald S. Ross in 1994, and Dr. Sam Gaines, in 2000. The goal of the *JAMA* article ‘is to encourage a discussion within the profession of medicine about how to heal and unify the profession in the pursuit of providing equitable health care for all.’ This continues to be the policy of the Sangamon County Medical Society and its Board of Directors,” said Dr. Bleyer.

SCMS has attached two excerpts to this press release containing further information about Dr. Alonzo H. Kenniebrew and Dr. Edwin A. Lee that are from our history book, *Cultivating the Science and Art of Medicine, 1899-2001*, by Kathryn Wrigley, medical librarian and historian. Director of the Health Sciences Library at St. John’s Hospital, she is a former editor of the *Papers of the Abraham Lincoln Association*. Photos of Drs. Kenniebrew and Lee, along with further information, are available on SCMS’ Web site, [www.scmsdocs.org](http://www.scmsdocs.org).

Established in 1899, the Sangamon County Medical Society is a non-profit professional organization of over 1,000 physician, resident and medical student members from Sangamon County whose mission is to provide leadership in healthcare through service, education and advocacy for our members, patients and the community in Central Illinois. We encourage the membership and participation of all local physicians and physicians in training. We welcome any insight into how we could further boost participation by ethnic minorities. #####