

Bio-Narrative

James L Fleming, MD

Dr Jim Fleming is a physician and Board Certified Psychiatrist who has been in clinical practice since finishing psychiatric residency at St Elizabeths Hospital in Washington, DC in 1989. He is a Life Member of the American Psychiatric Association (APA) and is currently Chair of the APA Caucus on Climate Change and Mental Health. From May 2015 to May 2020, he served as a Representative from Missouri to the APA's main governance body, the Assembly where he sponsored several successful resolutions on climate change policy and mental health including an effort requiring the APA to cease investments in funds primarily derived from fossil fuels income. Dr Fleming also works closely with the Climate Psychiatry Alliance (CPA) (www.climatepsychiatry.org) serving on the CPA Steering Committee a small group of dedicated psychiatrists who also form the core leadership of the APA climate caucus.

Dr Fleming's initial involvement with the APA Assembly coincided closely with Donald Trump's announcement that he was going to run for President. A year later it became clear that Trump was going to be a serious candidate despite lack of experience in government and a brash style of campaigning with name-calling and personal attacks on opponents, immigrants and critics. His behavior led to speculation from various quarters of including some psychiatrists about his "mental health" and fitness (or lack thereof) for office. This in turn led the APA to resume a vigorous defense of the then 43 year old so-called Goldwater Rule which prohibits psychiatrists from providing a "professional opinion" on public figures. Dr Fleming first commented on in an article published in the Missouri district branch of the Missouri Psychiatric Physicians Association (see reference and link in email).

After Trump was sworn in as President in January 2017, concerns about his mental and characterological fitness continued to be expressed. In response to numerous inquiries from both APA members and the public, the APA Ethics Committee issued a defense of the Goldwater Rule in March 2017 (<https://www.psychiatry.org/newsroom/news-releases/apa-reaffirms-support-for-goldwater-rule>). This opinion greatly expanded the notion of what constituted a "psychiatric opinion" and created a stir among the membership with some deciding to leave the organization.

In May 2018, Dr Fleming submitted an Action Paper (resolution) in the APA Assembly which would have required the APA to revisit the Goldwater Rule by clarifying how psychiatrists could comment on the behavior of public figures when it was clearly in the public interest to do so without compromising professional standards. The resolution did not pass, garnishing only about 30% of the Assembly vote but generated a lively discussion about the problems associated with both the original Goldwater Rule and the March 2017 Opinion of the Ethics Committee. In recently reviewing that opinion again Dr Fleming noticed an internal contradiction which highlights the impracticality of trying to prevent individual psychiatrists from carrying their ethical duties under other aspects of the APA Ethics Code. This could form the essence of an academic paper which could prompt a renewed discussion within the field of psychiatry and specifically in the APA about the importance of psychiatrists sharing their expertise in the interest of the public good. Dr Fleming will be trying to recruit interest among

colleagues who may want to cooperate on such a paper. Donald Trump is likely not the last of aspiring authoritarians who also know how to take advantage of disgruntled demographics by using divisive scapegoating rhetoric and tactics. Thus such a discussion is necessary first in the psychiatric and forensic literature and then in the broader profession as well as the public sphere.

The APA's most recent defense of the Goldwater Rule came shortly before the Nov 3rd 2020 election in the form of a letter to the Washington Post from APA President Dr Jeffrey Geller who responded to a challenge in the Post a few days earlier by Mary Trump, the President's niece. She called upon psychiatrists to ignore the Goldwater Rule in order to warn the public about the dangers of another four years of her uncle as President. Dr Fleming was very disappointed in Dr Geller's letter which he found disjointed as well as accusatory so in response wrote an open letter to Mary Trump expressing appreciation for her efforts (reference sent).

More immediate concerns than trying to get the APA to overturn the Goldwater Rule however are addressing some of the dangerous trends which Trump has unleashed, most acutely addressing the COVID pandemic. Trusting for the moment that the Biden Administration will be able to marshal the necessary resources to get the pandemic under control, Dr Fleming is working on another issue now which may turn out to be the longest lasting toxic legacy of the Trump era: climate change denial which has manifested dangerous changes in U. S. energy policy and U.S. withdrawal from Paris climate agreement.

As Chair of the APA Caucus on Climate Change and Mental Health, Dr Fleming has helped lead a successful effort to raise the status of the climate caucus to that of a permanent committee in the APA. This committee aims to engage APA leadership, staff, members, and allied groups to fulfill – in a timely, effective and ongoing manner – APA's commitment to its [2017 Position Statement on Mental Health and Climate Change](#): **“The American Psychiatric Association (APA) recognizes that climate change poses a threat to public health, including mental health. Those with mental health disorders are disproportionately impacted by the consequences of climate change. APA recognizes and commits to support and collaborate with patients, communities, and other healthcare organizations engaged in efforts to mitigate the adverse health and mental health effects of climate change.”**

It should also be noted that—because of the pandemic and the traumatic killings of George Floyd, Briana Taylor and other African Americans--2020 has highlighted as never before the need for environmental advocates to address the deep connections between systemic racism including environmental racism and health care inequities. We already knew that climate change and other environmental challenges disproportionately impact poor and minority communities. Hopefully we have woken up to the reality that we can't move forward without on climate justice without actively engaging in efforts to racial injustice. Dr Fleming addressed these connections in a recent article in the Sept 2020 newsletter of the Missouri Psychiatric Physicians Association entitled:

Finding Hope in Troubled Times: COVID-19, Structural Racism and Accelerating Climate

Disruption. In this article he highlights public, online statements by the Sierra Club, the largest and one of America's oldest environmental organizations of which Dr Fleming is a Life Member.

Sierra Club's Statement on Trump's State-Sanctioned Violence Against Protesters, June 2, 2020 (<https://www.sierraclub.org/press-releases/2020/06/sierra-club-s-statement-trump-s-state-sanctioned-violence-against-protesters>)

Here are some excerpts Dr Fleming included and would like to highlight from Sierra Club:
"We can't fulfill our mission to 'enlist humanity' to protect the planet while racism continues to divide us. There can be no climate justice without an end to the anti-Blackness and white supremacy that empowers polluters to create environmental **sacrifice zones**" (emphasis added).

NOTE: "A **sacrifice zone** " is a geographic area that has been permanently impaired by environmental damage or economic disinvestment...most commonly found in low-income and minority communities"
(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sacrifice_zone).

Hop Hopkins, director of strategic partnerships for the Sierra Club director uses the term while putting the intersecting crises of systemic racism and climate change in perspective(10):

"...we will never survive the climate crisis without ending white supremacy. Here's why: You can't have climate change without sacrifice zones, and you can't have sacrifice zones without disposable people, and you can't have disposable people without racism.

... If we valued everyone's lives equally, if we placed the public health and well-being of the many above the profits of a few, there wouldn't be a climate crisis."