Icahn
School of
Medicine at
**Mount
Sinai**

March 27, 2017

Mitchell J. Silver, Commissioner
New York City Department of Parks and Recreation
24 West 61st Street
New York, NY 10025

Dear Commissioner Silver:

Dr. J. Marion Sims is often presented as a pioneering humanitarian for developing and popularizing new surgical procedures to treat vesicovaginal fistulas. This portrayal of his legacy fails to acknowledge the fact that Sims worked in the antebellum South and experimented on black women slaves, making his surgical discoveries in a way that would be considered unethical by bioethicists today.

The fact that black women slaves were subjected to Sims' initial surgical experiments instead of free white women reflects the systematic oppression of African Americans in United States history. It is unlikely these women understood the unknown risks of Sims' untested fistula repair techniques. It is also hard to imagine that they were truly free to refuse to participate in his procedures, given that they were not seen as free persons by their own government. Therefore, they were likely neither fully informed nor able to give consent.

Additionally, Dr Sims' decision to perform gynecologic procedures without anesthesia goes against the universal principle of minimizing harms to human research subjects. Though there are historians that argue that Sims was not familiar with recently discovered anesthetic agents, it is also likely that black women's pain was under-appreciated, or simply disregarded. In fact, one Sims biographer thought these women were particularly "stoic" because of their "racial endowment." Given that even recent studies link doctors' implicit biases to decreased use of pain medication in black patients, one can only imagine the biases during the time of slavery.

Imagine for a moment the trauma these women experienced: completely exposed, physically held down, forced to feel the painful touch of the knife on the most sensitive and intimate parts of their bodies, repeating this nightmare without knowing what the outcome would be or having a way to make it stop.

As physician-educators and physician-scientists at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, we propose that no matter how revolutionary the discovery, the way in which scientific advances are made must be judged by consistent ethical standards. To that end, we firmly believe that the statue of Dr. Sims on Fifth Avenue and 103rd Street MUST be removed from its site and scrapped. It does not belong on display anywhere unless it is used to constantly remind us of the oppression of African American people throughout our history, and the degree to which medical science has contributed to that oppression.

Sincerely yours,

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Assistant Dean, Administration

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