

EIP

Celebrating Black History Month 2022: Vivien Thomas

October is Black History Month in the UK and this year's theme is Time for Change: Action not words. In commemoration, each week we will be profiling a different Black person who has made a significant contribution in a particular technical field. EIP's Diversity Focus Group see this as opportunity to share information and learn about different perspectives and histories.

Week 1

Vivien Thomas (1910-1985) was an American laboratory supervisor and surgical technician who (among other things) helped develop a procedure used to treat cyanotic heart disease in the 1940s. Cyanotic heart disease is a potentially fatal birth defect that results in low levels of oxygen in the blood (which can cause the skin and / or lips to turn blue – also known as 'blue baby syndrome').

Thomas' story is remarkable not only because of the significant challenges he faced, including poverty and racism, but also because of his lack of university education. Despite this, he went on to become a cardiac surgery pioneer who trained a generation of surgical residents in his Johns Hopkins surgical lab, where he worked for 35 years.

Although now credited for his role in developing a ground-breaking surgical technique to treat cyanotic heart disease, he was denied that recognition at the time and for several decades after. Thomas' story has since been dramatised in the 2004 HBO film *Something the Lord Made*.

You can read more about Vivien Thomas [here](#).

While it may be worthwhile reflecting on and highlighting the achievements of people like Vivien Thomas, we should be reminded that as a society some of the problems he faced still persist today: for example, there remains an 'ethnicity pay gap'.^[1] So, although many organisations are doing work around workforce diversity, there is a sense that change is coming too slowly or not at all in some areas, and that more needs to be done.

[1] The ethnicity pay gap shows the difference in the average pay between staff from ethnic minority backgrounds in a workforce, compared to 'White' staff.