PonJola Coney, M.D., Senior Associate Dean for Faculty Affairs, Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology, and Director, VCU Center on Health Disparities, understands the profound impact that can result from taking a personal interest in someone to help them reach their potential. Her high school science teacher encouraged her to have a career in the sciences and she became a medical technologist. While working in the hospital, a friend who was a medical student encouraged her to apply to medical school.

Dr. Coney received her M.D. from the University of Mississippi Medical Center in 1978, one of 15 African American students in her medical school class of 150. Inspired by recent advances in reproductive medicine, she became an infertility specialist. In 1984 Dr. Coney established the infertility program at the University of Oklahoma, six years after the world's first “test-tube baby” was born, and went on to establish programs at the University of Nebraska and University of Arizona. Her efforts at these institutions yielded more than 500 births.

Moving to Meharry Medical College in 2002, Dr. Coney was the first African American woman physician to be appointed Dean of any U.S. medical school, also serving as Senior Vice President for Health Affairs. At Meharry, she doubled research funding in 3 years and established four national academic research centers that support and enhance training in health disparities. Dr. Coney has contributed steadily to the literature, and has garnered funding totaling over $27 million from NIH and industry.

Dr. Coney was in the first class of the Hedwig van Ameringen Executive Leadership in Academic Medicine (ELAM) Program for Women and was a Founding Director of the Society for Executive Leadership in Academic Medicine (SELAM, now WESH).

Dr. Coney serves as administrative core director for a National Center on Minority Health and Health Disparities (NCMHHD) funded Health Disparity Research Center of Excellence in Infant Mortality and Pregnancy Outcomes. As director of VCU's Center on Health Disparities, she has built an impressive pipeline program for underrepresented students in the biomedical sciences and initiatives to address disease burden in minority populations.

Dr. Coney is board certified in Reproductive Endocrinology and Infertility and maintains a clinical practice. "She provides superb care to her patients," declares David Chelmow, M.D., Leo J. Dunn Distinguished Professor and Chairman, OB-GYN. "On behalf of the department, I wish she had more clinical time to spend with us."

With this wealth of experience, Dr. Coney is a valued advisor. "I have sought her advice on a number of occasions," recalls Ellen Brock, M.D., M.P.H., Associate Professor of OB-GYN and Medical Director, VCU Center for Human Simulation and Patient Safety. "She has a good natured way of pointing out the
inevitability of difficult decision making, the importance of informing those decisions with well considered priority-setting, and the need to move beyond those decisions as efficiently as possible in the interest of progress."

Dr. Coney is a member of AOA and has received many honors for her work in academia and the community. In 2012, in recognition of her groundbreaking contributions to women's health and health disparities, Dr. Coney was elected to the Institute of Medicine, one of the highest honors in the fields of health and medicine.

Her compassion, strong leadership skills, and determination make Dr. Coney an exemplary role model and advocate for all. She has positively impacted the lives of thousands of patients, community members, medical students, residents, faculty, and other health professionals. Dr. PonJola Coney is most deserving of the 2014 WISDM Professional Achievement Award.