Conversation With My Doctor

November 16, 2018 By Aundaray Guess

Last week during my primary doctor visit, something happened which was an affirmation to me that I had the right doctor. Despite the fact, my reasoning for the visit was to check in on my HIV care, we spent most of the time discussing something that also affected me and my status. Racism.

My primary doctor, Robert Chavez is based in Manhattan and I have been seeing him for many years. Not to make this a love song about Dr. Chavez, I do have to point out how he represents medical care that many other doctors probably wouldn't or couldn't give their patients.

In my case upon my visit and after checking in on if anything was happening health-wise, we then started to talk about the national conversation on the rise in racism and the comments and actions of the current administration as it relates to race.

On a personal level, I shared my almost daily encounters, especially being the typical stereotype image of being a tall, fairly muscular, black man with a shaved head. A visage that often produces fear in white people for no justifiable reason. So if anyone could share their perspectives on race, I could do it with no problem. Yet often there is no room to discuss something like race. And especially on a doctor's visit. There may be of an unawareness of the need as often people of color don't often voice their encounters as to do so would be a daily occurrence. As black people, we know of the encounters and often can predict when it's going to happen. So as a way to protect our mental state or not to feed into it, we build up mental walls that allow us to ignore others inflicting it. If we do discuss it, it's usually triggered by a social media account of a person being confronted with racist behaviors.

Yet it also speaks to the privilege of only dealing with one's HIV without the inclusion of race. A person of color has to factor in race as that also has an attachment to their health. As we spoke about my recent personal experiences, Mr. Chavez did as well. Although he has a Spanish sounding name, if you saw him you wouldn't think that was his background. Yet even with his olive tone skin, as he shared, he would be invited into spaces in which others felt comfortable to spew out their hate to those of color, or there would that one who, sensing he wasn't white, evoking their privilege onto him.

In this sharing, I saw my doctor as more human. Although he was always an open and gracious person, this discussion allowed me to know him even more. The discussion itself spoke to something really important to me, when treating anyone's HIV, doing so in a 360-degree manner.

Meaning that a doctor is not simply treating only the HIV but also looking at a patient's whole environment to see what has the potential to affect their health.

Race may not seem like it has an attachment, but just consider that in dealing with racism any encounters, can bring forth depression especially if you feel victimized and/or stigmatized simply because of the color of your skin. That depression and the feeling of low self-worth may then be a reason for someone to not maintain their medical regimen on a regular basis that includes taking one's medication or seeing their doctor. There have even been studies on how racism can attribute to hypertension or high blood pressure.

Knowing this I realize how fortunate I am that I have a doctor who's not pushing me out the door without first seeing how the wholeness of myself is doing. I hope other doctors adopt this model and not just with people of color living with HIV but all their patients. Checking in to ask about the world their patient is living in and trying to determine if they hear anything that could hinder or should be a part of their HIV care. They discover something new about who they're seeing.

So thank you, Dr. Chavez, for not treating me simply like a billable unit. My conversation with you made me feel….human. And I look forward to talking to you again.

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