Prescription Against Stigma

June 20, 2013 By Aundaray Guess

"When are you going to write about us", a comment that was made to me recently and repeatedly from the pharmacy where I obtain my HIV medication. It was a good question as I've been receiving my prescriptions from them for a while and looking back over those years I realize the people at Sugerhill Pharmacy in Harlem has been more than pill dispensers but have been great allies to not only helping me with my health but also much needed assistance. When thinking of who's in you corner when it comes to your health, the top answer is often your doctor and the nurses that provide care. Your pharmacist may not rank as high but for others like me its right up there as being an invaluable part of my support system in my life living with HIV.

Initially when I needed a place to go for my medication I was reluctant to go to my current pharmacy. I felt there were two good reasons for me not to get my HIV prescription filled there. One was the fact that it was in my neighborhood. I was once in the mindset that all my service for my status would be done out of my neighborhood for fear someone I know would ask questions. The sad part about receiving services for your HIV is that because of the stigma associated with it, others like me at the time follow this practice. A great care center may be only blocks away but individuals may choose to travel miles away because of the stigma. The second reason for my hesitancy was that because the pharmacy was small and not part of a large chain, it would have more of a family feel and I believed that my health status wouldn't be welcomed in that particular family. In a way I preferred the cold dispensing of my medication from a huge chain that didn't care that there was a person behind that pill.

Looking back I remember the fear I had about handing over my prescription that had my doctor's scribble for HIV medication. I think the feeling came from previous pharmacies I've been to where the pharmacist looks at the paper and then looks at you over his reading glasses. A look that says, "You're one of them". Even at that moment the person at the register has power as sometimes they're not skilled in their tact as they state out loud how you're supposed to take you medication or store it. So starting my new relationship with Sugerhill made me hope it wasn't going to be a bad experience.

I have to say Dave Khantses and his crew eased all my fears by informing me he knew my doctor and he has a great relationship with him based on others who medications he filled. It was a relief as you knew right away this was going to be a 'safe' place and one of understanding. You can say I was fortunate as since then he has help schooled me on options that were available to me as someone living with HIV. Dave was the one who informed me about ADAP (AIDS Drug Assistance Program). This came after having a casual discussion with him of how expensive it was, even with

my co-pay, to purchase my prescriptions. Despite having health insurance, because of my regimen the co-pays of my medications were easily close to a hundred dollars a month. That's excluding any other ailments that would require me to get a prescription such as antibiotics. I'm not alone is this aspect as I know of a friend who simply didn't get a prescription filled as he couldn't afford all the co-pays. Luckily Dave helped me through the process as I never had a case manager and in the end it made it easier on my wallet.

I even thank the pharmacy for helping me find my current doctor. My regular doctor had decided to leave his position leaving me to find another care provider. Starting any relationship is difficult including finding a new doctor. It was a relief when Dave, again knowing many HIV doctors based on conversations with his customer, directed me to the one I'm currently with. This type of assistance is a long way from some of the previous bad experiences I have received from larger pharmacies, especially chains. Of course not all chain pharmacies are bad but in my experience I often felt like a number instead of the 'family'.

I think the value of a good pharmacy can be underestimated. I say this especially for those who are just starting a HIV regimen. The one thing a person doesn't want to do is not get their scripts filled based on perceived or real stigma. I think even for us long-termers it's a good reminder that a great pharmacy can be a place for resources and referrals. And if you're a person like me who doesn't need a case manager it helps. Pharmacists speak every day to doctors throughout the city and can get a good sense on the good ones versus those who don't have the best follow through. Like the folks at Sugerhill they can also provide information on programs or assistance that your doctor may not even be aware. Of course I say this to not have your pharmacist replace your doctor but together they make a great team. Yet ironically it was the pharmacy that informed me I could switch to a single pill for one of my medication instead of taking two a day. For me it's an understanding that doctors can be overwhelmed and those little pieces of information can slip by but it's nice to have someone else informing me.

So thank you Dave, Helselenne and Jung for welcoming me into the family and helping me with my care. On many occasions you've went the extra mile and always did it with a smile. My two dogs even feel welcomed when I bring them in! It's the simple things that make a positive impact and I just know for the newly diagnosed walking into your store for the first time with a prescription in their hand, they're going to be well taken care of. But of course if they had asked me I would have told them they were in good hands. See you guys next month!

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