The two most powerful people you will meet

February 16, 2011 By Aundaray Guess

In my early days of seeking treatment for my HIV, one of the reasons why I never followed through with my doctor appointments was because I hated to wait in the waiting room. I say this because most clinics have one HIV specialist and he/she may only see patients on a particular day. For me it was a Tuesday. So you knew when you went for your appointment, that most of the people waiting were there was because of your HIV status. It was like a scarlet letter was placed on you as you didn't have to tell you business but just by you being in that room on that day, everyone in that room knew your business.

Stigma is mentioned a lot and it can happen in medical spaces, in fact it happens a lot without the staff aware they're doing it.

I once had a situation where during the week this particular clinic serviced 'regular people' on any other days, except for Tuesday which again was the day the HIV day. When you're dealing with stigma it's hard especially if you're newly diagnosed or visiting a new clinic for the first time, you already have this fear of walking into the unknown.

In some cases even before you see the doctor you have to past the most two powerful people in the organization and based on their understanding and recognition of stigma, you may be left with a bad encounter and decide you never want to see the doctor.

The two positions of power I speak of are the security guard and the receptionist desk.

I was in a case where the security guard knew that it was HIV day and based on his coldness and abruptness you knew he didn't want to interact with 'those' people. So you try to make it past the person without any incidents, someone who because of the uniform they wear, and probably this is the only moment they have power in their lives, decides to make it difficult to pass by asking for ID or making you state why you're there, forcing you to disclose.

You then make it to the receptionist desk. For some they may have only good stories, but others may experience the same coldness that greeted them at the door and the devalue of self-based on the way the person at the desk determines your worth and if they're ready to deal with you.

I had one experience where I finally blew up. It was a situation where I knew that the receptionists were cold and after awhile you build up this thick skin, but then you realize you can only take so much. I had episodes where I was spoken to like a child and told to almost basically sit in the corner until she was ready for me. Or a case where very loudly they asked why I was there and literally told everyone in the waiting room why I was there.

I think I finally had it when I was quietly waiting at the desk waiting for the receptionist to finish the phone call with her friend as they were trying to decide what to do for the weekend. After ten minutes of waiting and no acknowledgment, all the past episodes I endured came rushing out and I snapped. I banged my hand on the desk and told her not only had I been waiting but I wanted to see her supervisor. It’s amazing how nice people get when you ask to see their supervisor.

But the episode made me think of those who are scared and hesitant to begin with. Those who don’t have advocacy skills and the knowledge of reporting bad behavior. For those people episodes like that may add to their already sense of self-worth which may be already low based on the fact they have the virus. Some may take the unprofessional experience in silence, some may be like me and make noise and then there are those who just give up and don’t seek the treatment that they need based on the gatekeepers.

I implore people to speak up. A place of health should be there to make you healthier, not sicker and if you have to make some noise, then make some noise. But by allowing stigma type behavior to happen you not only cheat yourself out of a much needed doctor visit, you’re also not getting the health check-up from your doctor who may be unaware of what’s going on out front. Making noise serves not only you but also someone who may encounter the same ignorance.

Take the power back and give it to yourself and your health and to others!

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