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What is this anger and profound sadness I feel? What is this confusion and pain I feel? What is this rage, sense of injustice and futility I feel? It is the aftermath of sustained, repeated trauma. Trauma that touches my heart, my soul, my mind and my body. It doesn't matter if it's trauma I have personally experienced or witnessed. It doesn't matter if it's a story told by my father or by a friend. It doesn't matter if it's portrayed in a movie or seen in actual news coverage. The response is the same. There are tears that reflect the pain in my gut and anger in my mind. I can try to be calm, try to be dispassionate but that does not help. I can participate in weighty discussions or loud debates about what we should do, what should have been done, who should be fired and who should be hired. But we all know that there are no easy fixes. This is not an issue that sprung up out of nowhere; it represents a long history, a pattern of systemic racism inflicted upon a people that were not viewed as people.

How many times must we watch men, women, boys and girls be terrorized by those vested with power by our society? That power is supposed to keep order, to help us feel protected; but that power is used to intimidate, to clearly communicate that you are not something to be protected, you are something the rest of us are to be protected from.

How many times must we watch the double, no, the triple and quadruple standard be applied? Colin Kaepernick knelt on a football field as a sign of protest. It was peaceful, it was powerful, it was impactful; yet, he was vilified; fans screamed out that he was unpatriotic, that he hated this country; and he was marginalized by the NFL. Ben Kesling applied his knee to the neck of George Floyd while he was handcuffed and face down on pavement for 8 minutes and 46 seconds (520 seconds). Most people can hold their breath for 30 seconds. Navy Seals, the best of the best, can hold their breaths for 120 – 180 seconds. But no one can hold their breath for 520 seconds. Mr. Floyd was nonresponsive for the final 2 minutes and 53 seconds. A fellow officer stood by with his hands in his pockets.

What is the impact of this trauma? What is the impact of systemic racism? There are long-term and short-term effects.

One of the long-term impacts is multi-generational trauma, and these impacts are felt by the victims, the perpetrators, and their respective communities. One impact is desensitization. I remember a telling scene from the movie "A Time to Kill," in which a Black man was being prosecuted for killing the men who abducted, raped, and beat his 10-year old daughter. There are ups and downs during the trial but towards the end, it appears as if an acquittal is unlikely. During closing arguments, the father's attorney tells the jury to close their eyes and listen to a story. He describes, in slow and painful detail, the entire ordeal of the 10-year old little girl. At the conclusion of the story, the attorney then asks the jury, "now imagine she's White." Oftentimes, when I consider how people's behavior are viewed, I ask myself, "How would this be different if he/she was White?" Consider the Charleston church shooting in 2015 where nine people were murdered during Bible Study. When Dylan Roof was arrested, he complained of being hungry, so officers treated him to a free meal from Burger King. In May – June 2020, peaceful protestors were shot with rubber bullets, sprayed with tear gas, and tackled and thrown to the ground. This double standard is not just applied in the criminal justice system. Every day

we are confronted with political leaders and policy makers who lie, twist facts, and then deny all wrong-doing. Every day I wonder, how would this behavior be perceived and received if the perpetrators were people of color? The entire history of our country was and continues to be intertwined with a double standard based on race and economics. Consider “The Trail of Tears,” Jim Crow laws, Japanese Internment Camps during World War II, and immigrant detention centers today. Who gave American settlers the right to claim someone else’s land? Who gave southern politicians the right to segregate public facilities funded by un-segregated tax dollars? During World War II, we fought against the Germans and the Japanese. Why weren’t German-Americans sequestered in Internment Camps? Immigrants to the United States come from around the world. Why is it that recent Executive Orders restricted immigration from Africa, the Middle East, Central America, and Latin America?

“Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”¹ But have we, as African American people, ever really been free in this country? If freedom means not having to worry about being treated differently when you shop in a high-end store, then no, we’re not free. If freedom means seeing an officer roll up beside you or behind you and not having to wonder if an encounter will be civil or lead to death, then no, we’re not free. If freedom means there are no longer laws, regulations and/or policies in place that are flagrantly biased, then no, we’re not free. If freedom means that outspoken, intelligent African American men and women are not marginalized, dismissed or ignored, then no, we’re not free. If freedom means that a diverse workforce is not considered “politically correct” instead of necessary for vital productivity, then, no, we’re not free. And finally, if freedom means that when I walk into the office of a healthcare provider, I am assured that I will receive the same level of respect, courtesy and quality of service that Caucasian clients receive, then no, we’re not free.

So again, I ask, “What is the impact of this trauma? What is the impact of systemic racism? Specifically, what is the impact of this trauma contextualized within systemic racism on the health of African Americans?”

This edition of the Delaware Journal of Public Health is dedicated to Racism and Health. What does it look like, what does it feel like, how is it operationalized through the lens of physicians, attorneys, educators, social workers and health advocates? These are critical voices that need to be heard; but we must be mindful that cultural, societal and individually-experienced trauma is a constant overlay, the proverbial, ever-present watermark on the lives of African Americans. It is an honor and a privilege for me to serve as one of the Guest Editors. My only hope is that, as you read, you will listen with your head and with your heart. This must stop, but it’s only by working together can we effect change.

References

1. Lincoln, A. (1863). The Gettysburg Address. Gettysburg, PA.

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