The Colorado Health Foundation™



This Story Has to Change

Some things never change, especially when it comes to parenting. My mama, for example, still checks in regularly on how things are going for me at work. She visits our office when she's in town visiting from North Carolina. We occasionally travel together. And, she reads each of my blog posts. It turns out she's more than one of my biggest fans — she's my fact checker, too.

In my last blog post (read it here if you missed it), I shared memories of going to the doctor as a child in rural North Carolina. Mama called me up after she read the post and offered a few corrections (minor, of course) that I wanted to share with you.

Mama's Corrections:

- There was *more than one* doctor in the county who saw black patients. However, mama confirmed that there was a real lack of culturally-responsive care. It was easy to know whether you were "welcomed or not."
- Dr. Lane, who I remember so clearly from childhood, was not the *only doctor* I went to when I was sick. As a teenager, I saw two other physicians in the community.

Good corrections. Mama's fact checking got me curious. While we were on the phone, I wondered what her story would be if I asked her the same questions I'd attempted to answer in the blog. So, I interviewed her. What had she recalled from her childhood in the 1940's and 1950's in rural North Carolina? What happened when she was sick and needed to see a doctor?

It turns out her story isn't all that different than mine. And, as we further explored the parallels in our experiences, we considered what the situation is today. Is the current story for low-income and vulnerable populations brighter, dimmer or just

plain different than 77 years ago? Is the historical legacy of oppression more than a legacy and still a common thread in our societal fabric?

Here's where we landed with our comparison: Going to the doctor was a luxury then, and it still is today for far too many. Oral care was even more hard to come by back in the day, and it still is today for far too many. Castor oil or lard were self-prescribed if an ailment or illness didn't heal — what less than optimum strategies are being used today? Mama talked about not being treated when she was sick because they didn't have health insurance — a fact that today remains reality for 28.2 million Americans (further, 22 million more people could lose coverage by 2026 according to a recent analysis of the Senate's Better Care Reconciliation Act)[1].

I believe stories are our most important currency. Stories enable us to see and share the forest through the trees of data and numbers. They provide perspectives — each contributing a piece of the truth. Stories are also key to our emotional literacy. We cannot be open-hearted without emotions, and stories bring them to life. In this case, in this collective recollection capturing more than 70 years of living, our story of whether health is in reach or not reflects little progress for a broad swath of society. It's a story of inequitable experience.

I also believe that health is a basic human right. I am simply bewildered, saddened and angered that this story of access to care has not changed enough over time to matter. My and Mama's story is too similar to what children today, right this minute, are living. Mama grew up in the Jim Crow segregated south. I grew up in a less segregated south, but still experienced racism and other oppressions that could have threatened my health and well-being.

Going through this experience of rewriting my story to make some basic corrections has confirmed the importance and urgency of the Foundation's work. We can't afford for two more generations to pass and things remain unchanged.

I’m more proud than ever to work for an organization that is relentless in the pursuit of health equity and opportunity … That we support and want to work closely with vulnerable populations so we can change their stories, and their children’s and grandchildren’s stories.

Babies born in 2017 and years to come deserve to grow up to tell a different story: one that is unscathed by inequity and injustice.

[1] Jost T. CBO Projects That 22 Million Would Lose Coverage Under Senate Bill. http://healthaffairs.org/blog/2017/06/26/cbo-projects-that-22-million-would-lose-coverage-under-senate-bill/

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