Editor’s Letter-Winter 2008

It’s Your Health: Get Proactive.

December 3, 2008 By Kate Ferguson

I have a confession to make. Like many African Americans, I don’t trust the health care system. And that’s not because of the Tuskegee experiment, conducted over 75 years ago, during which researchers deliberately left 399 black men untreated for syphilis. It’s because of my own experiences with health care workers and the numerous examples of the callous and uncaring ways in which people—especially people of color—are treated when they go to the doctor.

For example, who can forget videos that documented the deaths of several people who went to the emergency room for medical care and wound up leaving on gurneys. One woman in New York City waited in the emergency room for hours, finally falling to the floor in convulsions, only to be ignored by health care workers as she lay dying.

How many stories have we heard about hospital patients who died because health care workers did not wash their hands or a doctor prescribed the wrong medicine or removed the wrong organ?

At times, I find myself wondering at the business-as-usual environment of health care institutions. My primary care facility is now chock-full of doctors offices. On the surface, it seems so very convenient. Patients can see myriad specialists in one place. Primary care physicians steer patients to their specialist colleagues. Trial-size medications are routinely dispensed—fresh out of the bag of the pharmaceutical rep who had lunch with your doctor just hours before.

So, yes, that kind of thing makes me wonder.

Don’t get me wrong. It’s not that I don’t think there are caring physicians who have the well-being of their patients at heart. And, no, I don’t think that all health care workers are reckless, uncaring and inept. But I do think that the system needs to make sure that it does have the best interests of the people it serves at heart.

If that means screening and training health care workers more stringently and carefully, then so be it. The reason for people’s distrust of the health care system is simple. People feel that institutions and the individuals who work there really do not care about the quality of the service they provide.

And, sure, it’s a really tough job, and somebody’s got to do it. But let’s try to get the right people to do it—ones who care, ones who are well trained and ones who know how to deal with the public.

The bottom line is that people must become more proactive in taking care of themselves. No one should leave his or her wellness entirely in the hands of health care providers. Indeed, no doctor can care more about you than you do about yourself. Also, over the years, I have learned to become informed and ask questions—many of them—of the doctors I see. For me, becoming educated about health issues is empowering. Sometimes the first step to achieving change starts by looking within.

Oh yes, about that distrust I feel; I’m working on it. How? By educating myself even more about health issues so I don’t feel as if I’m at the mercy of the health care system.

For me it’s a way to remain in control of my health and my ability to negotiate the system, which plays a big part in maintaining both my physical and mental well-being.

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