Commentary on Joyce Echaquan: Call for Institutional and Individual Allyship and Action
By Bernice Downey, Indigenous Health Lead, FHS
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It has been a long time since I read the comments section of news articles focused on Indigenous peoples or issues. The oft violent nature of the content would sit with me for days and I made a conscious decision to not put myself through that experience. Sometimes, it takes me a while before I can even view media footage or read an article because I know that it is going to be bad from just reading the headline. The coverage regarding Joyce Echaquan, a 37-year old Atikamekw woman and mother of seven children who live streamed her last moments of life on Facebook was sadly, an example. I knew it would be gut-wrenching to read. As an Indigenous woman, mother and grandmother, my initial reaction was one of feeling emotionally overwhelmed. To know that she suffered such pain and indignity during her final moments. To know that the individuals who taunted her, were nurses. These facts evoked feelings of sadness followed by an anger that has long been fuelled by similar cases that have emerged in the public realm over the course of both my clinical and administrative career.

An expression of collective grieving has taken place across the country in the days since this blatant display of racism. Indigenous peoples have taken to the streets and social media in protest calling for both acknowledgement and change. As often the case, the initial reaction of authorities is framed to mitigate risk. In this case a denial that systemic racism exists in Quebec. A denial in the face of a provincial level report of a three-year long inquiry into the way Indigenous Peoples are treated by public servants in the province that affirmed this fact only one year ago.

In spite of the tremendous loss and grief that Joyce’s family are going through, their call for change is perhaps the beacon for those among us who are striving to change the status quo. It was reported that while many members of her family have previously reported feeling uncomfortable or unwelcome during hospital visits, they want it to be different for their children. “We just want equality,” she said. “Whether you’re an Indigenous person or whatever your background or skin colour is, we all need to hold hands and move in the same direction, together.” (Family member, Montreal Gazette, September 30, 2020)

As educators of future nurses, doctors, rehab specialists, midwives, emergency responders, we need to hold on to this goal. We need to shift the response from one that is influenced by fear and risk mitigation. We need to continue to dialogue about racism and discrimination whether we are uncomfortable or not. We need to continue to educate ourselves and our students.

We need to hope and take action in order to move forward together to ensure that no one will experience what Joyce or her family experienced ever again. We need to assume of the roles of both Institutional and Individual Allies and take action. One small activity can make a difference and influence others to think, feel and be the change. Eventually, this could lead to media headlines that promote and celebrate the evidence of action and systemic change.
For more Information and Resources:

Media articles:

‘Indigenous woman records slurs by hospital staff before her death’

‘Racism in the medical system goes far beyond a few bad apples’

‘A call to end racism in Canada's health care systems’
https://www.macleans.ca/opinion/a-call-to-end-racism-in-canadas-health-care-systems/

Resources

Indigenous Health Initiative – resources link
https://healthsci.mcmaster.ca/ihi/resources

‘Indigenous Cultural Safety Collaborative Learning Series’
This national webinar series provides an opportunity to share knowledge, experiences, and perspectives in support of collective efforts to strengthen Indigenous cultural safety across sectors.
Website: http://www.icscollaborative.com/webinars

‘Exploring the Health Impacts of Anti-Indigenous Racism’

‘Cultural Safety in the Classroom: Addressing Anti-Indigenous Racism in Education Settings’

‘Setting the Context for Indigenous Cultural Safety: Facing Racism in Health’

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