

Racism in Medicine Kills People. I Have Seen It.

Category: Speaking Up

written by Sara Ann Conkling | July 3, 2020

The year was 1997, or thereabouts. She called on an otherwise slow day in the AIDS service agency I had started and was running on fumes and prayers. Her name was Mary.

Mary's voice was trembling. She had been raped, and beaten, and feared she had AIDS. I knew she needed medical attention, so I got into my car to find her house, a tiny home next to the railroad tracks.

I persuaded her to go with me to the local ER where the white, male doctor gave his black, female patient a cursory look. Her bruises and swelling were obvious. She had head pain and searing abdominal pain. She had been raped, but she wasn't examined for rape. She feared HIV but no testing was done. He didn't put one hand on her to examine her. I asked him to order tests, and he didn't. He ordered nothing. He told her to take ibuprofen and discharged her.

Mary was totally defeated.

I became tearful and angry as we left. I didn't get back into my car until I had arranged an appointment with my own family physician for the next day. The ER wasn't going to work for her. I didn't have any other string to pull.

Mary didn't get to keep her appointment. She died the next day before I could get her there. I will never know for sure what killed her but my guess would be an internal abdominal bleed. I'm not a doctor. She needed a doctor.

In the wake of her death, I raised holy hell. I wrote every single hospital board member an individual letter and sent it to their homes. The ER doctor was fired and removed from the medical staff. I called the police and made sure her death was investigated as a homicide. I made sure her treatment in the ER was part of the police record. I contacted her only child, a beautiful young, black man, and told him to get an attorney.

I couldn't save Mary by myself. I needed help, and I wasn't able to get it for her in time. I fought for her, but it wasn't enough. What happened to her still makes me cry.

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