

## **Lilah S' Human Rights Speech: Indigenous Health Care**

On September 28, 2020, Joyce Echaquan, an Indigenous woman, was taken to a hospital complaining of intense stomach pain. Immediately, all the doctors listened to her and asked what medicine she could take to help the pain, and she made the healthcare workers aware of her heart condition. Joyce was taken to get tests, and scans of her lungs ultimately showed a buildup of fluid in her lungs. Joyce was then treated and soon after, was sent home to be with her 7 kids and her partner of 23 years. Unfortunately, this is what should have happened. But it didn't.

Instead on September 28, 2020, Joyce Echaquan, an Indigenous woman, was reluctantly taken to a hospital by ambulance with her husband and eldest daughter after weeks of excruciating pain and vomiting blood. Joyce should have gone sooner but even after so much time and pain, she was still hesitant and concerned, as she thought the doctors wouldn't listen to her. When she arrived, the doctors restrained her to the hospital bed and assumed she was suffering from withdrawal and addiction. Instead of being given the medicine she needed, she lay afraid they gave her too much morphine, which she was allergic to. Instead of getting the tests she needed, she got yelled at by doctors and nurses with racial slurs and saying, "You made some bad choices, my dear," "What are your children going to think, seeing you like this?" Instead of being taken seriously and getting help, Joyce decided to livestream her experience. Everyone who was there heard her screaming in pain as she was forced to continue to listen to the medical staff insult and ignore her. On September 28, 2020 Joyce Echaquan died, because no one was listening.

Dear Toronto Heschel teachers and students, Indigenous health care discrimination is a serious issue that is affecting many Indigenous people every year in Canada. Everyone should have the right to access equal health care no matter their race, culture or ethnicity. And after many years this issue is still impacting the health of Indigenous people everywhere. Scientist Herbert Spencer thought of the concept Social Darwinism, the idea that some people become more powerful in society because they are naturally superior. These racist ideas were planted into people's heads, and shaped how we continued to treat Indigenous people as time progressed.

Joyce Echaquan's experience is sadly not unique. Many Indigenous people have reported abuse, stereotyping, stigma and absence of care when being treated by health care workers. However this stigma doesn't just occur in health care. In a survey representing discrimination in the Indigenous community, 44% of First Nations people, 24% of Métis, and 29% of Inuit people reported having faced prejudice in the past 5 years. This issue should be taken seriously not only to raise awareness, but also to ensure that indigenous people are treated fairly and equally in the future. As the Talmud states in **מסכת בבא מציעא, דף נ"ח, עמוד** **ב**. **וגר לא תונה ולא תלחצנו** גרים or גרים. Throughout Jewish history people have experienced being treated as strangers or גרים so we should learn how to not repeat those actions. In addition to receiving unfair, sometimes harmful treatment, research has shown that people who have been discriminated against in health care have poorer mental health. Other studies on racism in health care have indicated that health care workers' racial bias leads to unequal treatments and health decisions, resulting in "lower quality care for racialized groups". (LSA)

The health-care system has become a source of fear for Indigenous peoples, who are often reluctant to ask for help even when sick. And because this mistreatment is so common, they are usually prepared for it. Allan and Symelie, in 2015, analyzed studies showing that the discrimination toward Indigenous people is an issue that hasn't greatly changed in the past 10-15 years. As they expressed, "First people get second class healthcare."

Also in 2015, the Canadian government came together to discuss the discrimination against Indigenous people in health care and thought of numerous recommendations. The result of this effort was called the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In the commission there were different sections, each dealing with a different issue relating to discrimination against Indigenous people.

Recommendation Number 24 was to make mandatory the once optional course to learn how to treat aboriginal people's health issues and to recognize the discrimination that has happened in the past. This is a big step to get more health care workers to respect indigenous culture and treat them equally. Recommendations 18 and 21 were to take responsibility and recognize that there were substantial lasting effects of past mental and physical abuse from the residential schools and to provide healing centers for Indigenous people in Nunavut and the Northwest Territories. Additionally, it recognizes that the health of Indigenous people now is still permanently affected by their past experiences in these schools. Recommendations 20 and 22 addressed the fact that people from different cultures like Métis and Inuit have different health needs and beliefs and should be treated with respect accordingly. They should also be provided a healing treatment in which they feel most comfortable and acknowledged.

Despite all of these recommendations made in 2015, almost 6 years later Joyce Echaquan didn't get to go home to her family that day. Truth and reconciliation is a first step, and change doesn't happen overnight, but we must act now. The government has been executing the proposal to make the Indigenous health education course mandatory, and students in medical school will hopefully become more sensitive and educated doctors. But what about health care professionals practicing today, who don't have this training? Maybe discrimination rates and deaths will decrease in the future, but those who are already employed will not be required to learn and be educated, the people who are working now may not know how to treat Indigenous people with respect and equity.

It has been too long and too many people have suffered because of the slowness to act on these recommendations. Every health care professional has the responsibility to care for their patients equally; therefore, they have the responsibility to learn and be educated on each of their unique needs. There should be checks to monitor the diagnosis of patients and make sure they're being provided with the treatment that they need. The government needs to accept that this issue is killing innocent people every year. There needs to be funding dedicated to create programs and courses for all medical staff because it's time to admit there is a lack of time and money being given to effectively act on solutions for this issue. However, not just health care professionals are responsible; everybody needs to speak up. We can't just watch someone, a human being just like all of us, in pain. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said, "My first task in every encounter is to comprehend the personhood of the human being I face, to sense the kinship of being human, solidarity of being." We are all people and no one else should have to suffer because somebody can't accept that.

On September 28, 2020 Joyce Echaquan could have lived, and so could have many others. We can't change the past, or save all the innocent lives that have been lost and all of the families who have suffered. But we can and should change what happens in the future of healthcare. To make sure everyone gets equal opportunities and equal access to healthcare. To make sure we adjust the way we think and act fast on these recommendations. To make sure healthcare is something not to fear but to have faith in. Rabbi Abraham Heschel also said, "First and foremost we meet as human beings who have so much in common: a heart, a face, a voice, the presence of a soul, fears, hope, the ability to trust, a capacity for compassion and understanding, the kinship of being human." We are all humans who look different, speak differently, and believe in different things but in the end we're all people and by now that should be the only thing that matters.