

Dear Colleague:

Let me tell you the story of Chelsea, a patient of mine that will forever remain imprinted in my memory. Chelsea died of the stigma associated with HIV.

I was Chelsea's doctor from when she was a toddler until the day she died at the age of 19. She called me her dad. Her mother had an intellectual disability and acquired HIV through rape. Chelsea was then born with HIV.

As Chelsea became a teenager, she realized why her cousin, who was also her best friend, would not hug her. Her family had separate dishes for her. When she touched or sat on a chair, somebody would sanitize it afterwards. She felt rejected and isolated. Eventually, Chelsea stopped taking her medications. She could have lived a normal life, but she was made to feel untouchable. She died because her medications reminded her of the illness that made people treat her as an outcast. She died of the stigma of HIV.

When I started taking care of children with HIV in 1986, there was no known treatment. Most people died of the illness. Today, there are more than two dozen HIV medications, and the virus can be controlled indefinitely with appropriate therapy. Unfortunately, the stigma of HIV still prevents people from getting tested, staying in medical care, taking their medications, and disclosing their diagnosis to loved ones.

Despite all the advancements in medical treatment, stigma against mental illness, HIV/AIDS, and disabilities continues unabated because we have not done enough to overcome it. We need passionate and caring people like you to join us in speaking out for those who have lost their human rights because of illness.

I invite you to attend our **Sixth Annual International Conference on Stigma held at Howard University's Blackburn Center on November 20th, 2015 from 8 am-5 pm** and live webcast from 9am-5pm. We will also be hosting a post-conference musical extravaganza from 5:30pm-8 pm where you will meet fellow medical professionals, researchers, patients, and activists who are involved in the fight against stigma.

Stigma is the one virus we can all cure - if you care, be there!

Thank you,

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