



Perspective/Opinion

Asians in Healthcare Facing Racism as They Battle COVID-19 on the Frontlines

By Shannon Tai, MD, Internal Medicine, PGY-2

Upon extubation of a COVID-afflicted patient in the ICU, it was nothing short of amazing to see my patient breathe on his own again. It was all the more rewarding that I had contributed in a small way to his treatment and recovery. I held his hand and helped him take solace in this small victory. The next day during morning rounds, he maliciously accused me of giving him the “Chinese virus”. Stunned and unsure how to react, I wondered if I had done something wrong. The ICU RN immediately jumped in and told the patient that his comments were inappropriate.

The irony of the situation that I had spent many days and nights risking my personal health treating patients in the COVID ICU saddened and angered me. Later, I thanked the ICU RN for correcting his remark that may have perpetuated bias and hatred. Despite heightened emotions, I helped my patient’s family navigate through many tough ICU decisions. I felt a true personal stake in his care and did my best to treat him. But I felt like I was fighting multiple battles at the same time – not only was I on the frontlines of battling COVID-19 but also racism. I went into medicine thinking that I could help patients through some of the most emotionally and physically trying times of their lives, and it was heartbreaking to be accused of causing their ailment.

I realized that many in the world are misinformed or do not understand the implications of their actions or words.

Regardless of the intentions, these actions and words hurt. To get through the day, I learned to not take things so personally. It was hard to reconcile at first, but I eventually learned strategies from faculty for responding back to racist, sexist, and ageist comments.

During my intern year, I was constantly put into awkward positions where I had to confront overt racism and microaggressions without alienating patients. Thus, I had to actively compartmentalize my feelings so I could process the impact of these hurtful experiences without letting them cloud my judgment or affect patient care. After these types of encounters, my faculty encouraged me to debrief with the rest of the medical team to provide open communication.

One of the most important things I've learned during my first year of residency was that sharing painful experiences brings people together.

No resident can succeed alone without team effort, and it takes a community to heal the hurt. I am grateful to be at a program and institution that takes a hard stance against institutionalized racism. It is comforting to know that my colleagues and peers understand the magnitude of what I am going through, and I am forever thankful for all the nurses, residents, and attendings who have continuously bolstered my morale and helped renew my lifelong commitment to protect, serve, and heal our society's members in their times of greatest need.

Across the country, Asians in healthcare are facing racial discrimination in their workplaces and communities. The racial hostility has left Asians, who represent 18% of the country's physicians and 10% of its NPs, in a painful position on the frontlines of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ Some COVID-19 patients refused to be treated by us. Furthermore, there have been nearly 6,603 anti-Asian hate incidents, including physical assaults, civil rights violations, workplace discrimination, microaggressions, and harassment.²

Acknowledging that anti-Asian racism exists, being an active ally for your Asian colleagues, providing a safe space for your team members to discuss racial trauma, mitigating the outbreak of misinformation, and actively participating in anti-racist work are impactful first steps to begin supporting and protecting our Asian community.³

Shannon Tai is a second-year Internal Medicine resident physician at MCW. Her interests in medicine include public health, health policy, and rheumatology.

Citations:

1. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/05/19/asian-american-discrimination/>
2. <https://stopaapihate.org/national-report-through-march-2021/>
3. <https://closler.org/lifelong-learning-in-clinical-excellence/how-to-support-asian-american-and-pacific-islander-aapi-patients>