

Where's our moral outrage now?

Written by SHERALYN ROMAN

Earlier this year, despite COVID concerns, we shared a collective moral outrage about the treatment of persons of colour and joined in community support of the BLM movement. Rightly so, but in the meantime, Indigenous persons were also dying and continue to do so while we say nothing. Already it's 'yesterday's news' that Joyce Echaquan died alone, in pain, in a hospital bed while being verbally abused and taunted by the very medical staff in whom she should have been able to place her trust, especially while at her most vulnerable. She is not the first Indigenous person to suffer such a fate. That her death occurred just days before 'Orange Shirt Day,' on Sept. 30 is particularly egregious. Where's our moral outrage now?

Orange Shirt Day passed with little fanfare. A few posts on social media, a picture of some politicians wearing orange, and 'at least to my mind' very little else. It began in 2013 for the purposes of educating people about, and promoting awareness of, 'the Indian residential school system and the impact it has had on Indigenous communities for over a century.' Yet, just two days before celebrating the day (and despite many towns, cities and schools now proudly declaring 'land acknowledgements' before public meetings or during morning announcements) Joyce lay on a hospital bed near death, possibly given medication she was allergic to and alternately ignored or harassed. If she hadn't turned on her phone and recorded her abusers 'there's a pretty good chance we wouldn't be writing about this now and that's just wrong. How does something like this happen in a developed country with full, relatively unfettered access to health care? How is it that collectively, we did not hear about this death and rise up in anger to gather on the streets, online or even on social media in support of our Indigenous brothers and sisters, as willingly as we embraced Black Lives Matter this past summer?

More than 10 years ago, in 2008, another Indigenous person named Brian Sinclair also fell victim to the health care system. Having gone to the emergency room for what an inquest deemed an entirely treatable bladder infection, he waited there for over 34 hours before someone realized he was in fact dead! Brian, a double amputee who used a wheelchair, had sat in emergency for so long that when someone finally did check on him, rigor mortis had already set in. The best estimates suggest he had been dead for anywhere between 2-7 hours! Again I ask you how does this happen? How is it that someone in obvious need, with a disability, is not only ignored but actually dies without anyone realizing for several hours? The inquest into his death found in part, that medical staff had assumed he was drunk. We've had better than 10 years since then to make improvements in the system yet here we are still sharing horrific stories of Indigenous people dying because they seemingly aren't able to access the same health care as their fellow Canadians. We should be ashamed.

I'm tempted to say wearing an orange shirt does nothing to address chronic inequities and yet there is research to support that it could. There is a movement toward 'Trauma Informed Care' that could potentially help eliminate situations like those experienced by Sinclair and Echaquan. A 2019 paper on social determinants of health pointed to glaring discrepancies in the treatment of Indigenous persons who have experienced trauma. Understanding that trauma, and how to approach treatment is key. What are social determinants? They include: historical experiences with colonialism, racism, experiences of the residential school system and point to how each impacts not just the generation who experienced it first-hand but also those who are raised by them and subsequent generations too. Resulting inequities in education, diet, parenting skills, mental health and lifestyle choices each have a further impact on potential health outcomes for Indigenous persons. Is it possible therefore, that something as simple as wearing an orange shirt may help to enlighten and inform both this and future generations of medical health care professionals about trauma informed care, resulting in treating Indigenous persons appropriately and with care and compassion? Would such an approach prevent future unnecessary deaths? Given the little fanfare around Orange Shirt Day this year, I tend to believe the answer is no but it's equally tempting to have hope.

The husband of Joyce Echaquan said it best: 'She's Canadian, Indigenous also'..there's no human being that deserves to die with indignity, with humiliation and in fear.' He, and many others, would suggest Joyce was 'abused because the nurses thought 'they could' and that they would get away with it.' Certainly from my perspective, the lack of moral outrage amongst us would suggest they were right. Other than a lightening flash of attention in the news, a recent Google search doesn't really turn up anything new;

the promise of an inquiry and, eventually, a nurse and an orderly fired. So far ? that's it.

Collectively, we should be disgusted, disheartened and disturbed by the death of Joyce Echaquan, a mother of 7, just as we should have been disheartened, disgusted and disturbed when Brian Sinclair died. The time for demanding change is nigh. What will it take? Why aren't you outraged?