I Can't Breathe!

I can't breathe. These words haunt me. As I write, we are trying to recover from one global state of emergency—the COVID-19 pandemic—and have been thrust into another calamity of protests and violence across our beautiful country. The first emergency was perhaps unavoidable, a freak of nature. But the second? We all have watched the horrific video of the death of George Floyd crying for air while being restrained by police. Another black life taken without cause. Senseless. Yet it happens again and again.

You might question why I would discuss this topic in an editorial in *JNCCN*. As tragic as these events are, what does this have to do with oncology or with healthcare in general? Well, as it turns out, racial bias, conscious or not, is pervasive in everything we do.

Our Chancellor at UCSF wrote a beautiful letter to the faculty, pointing out that racism, an inequitable system of privilege, is so pervasive and foundational in our society that it has actually become part of our structure. Thus, simply denouncing the acts of racism is not enough. We must each examine our own biases to understand how we, as individuals, contribute to this culture. We can't change it until we recognize it.

As medical professionals, we must take apart the structural barriers in education to ensure that our workforce mirrors the communities we serve. We need to accelerate efforts to eliminate healthcare disparities. These are particularly evident in cancer care where outcomes are worse for black Americans across many cancers and where black and brown people frequently face many barriers in access to care for prevention and early detection. This should be something we think about every day. More importantly, we should put our words into action.

Begin by talking about it. Keep the conversations going, even after the pain of Mr. Floyd's death has eased. Discuss it with your family, your colleagues, your students. Keep yourself and others aware that this needs fixing.

Next, do something. If nothing else, donate liberally to organizations with proven success in advancing social justice. If you have time, use your talent: tutor, volunteer in free clinics, write to policymakers about the need for healthcare equity, and promote diversity on boards and committees. There are many outlets for this.

I'll end with a little story. An acquaintance of mine in San Francisco told me that on her walk home one night, she stopped two black men that she thought might be trying to steal a car parked in front of her apartment. It turns out that the car belonged to one of the men, who had locked his key inside and was trying to retrieve it. I confess, my first reaction was concern about her safety. In thinking about this now, I wonder, would she have stopped two white men? And would I have been as concerned about her safety? Think about it.

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