

Keynote Message for Open Arms Perinatal Services

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I work as a pediatrician in a community based clinic and I love my job.

I am extremely privileged to work beside remarkable people who display commitment and compassion every day.

I am also honored to serve an amazing community where families display inspiring resilience in the face of daunting challenges.

And when I say daunting, I mean: incredible barriers, coming in bunches, nothing but hard choices, rooted in societal inequities, perpetuating through generations, with heart-breakingly tragic consequences.

To say that inequities in communities are hard to contend with is an enormous understatement.

The evidence: like the lack of educational opportunities, food insecurity, unhealthy housing, inadequate access to healthy life options, lack of wellness-sustaining employment opportunities, and, ultimately, poor health, all this evidence is both irrefutable and **hard to accept**.

It is uncomfortable to openly and assertively contend with these truths because they say something about the disconnect between our societal values and reality.

It reveals something about us that we might not want to admit.

As a doctor, I look at this disconnect and, in trying to understand it, I've thought about society as a single being, a single organism, and I've come up with some diagnoses for this societal being.

You won't see these diagnoses in any medical manual, but they help me conceptualize things a bit.

As a pediatrician I see kids who end up labeled with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Well when I think about how we sometimes fall short of our values in our actions, I came up Intention Deficit, Hypo-Activity disorder.

If I were an ophthalmologist, I think I would diagnose a societal suffering blind spot.

If I were an orthopedist I think I would diagnose a justice limp.

If we checked society's blood we'd find an Anemia of Will.

I also think a thorough medical and neuropsychiatric exam would show America suffers from Premature economic recovery celebration syndrome.

America also seems to have Bootstrap delusional disorder.

In addition we would diagnose Overactive Gullible Glands that make us prone to buy arguments like it's ok to cut education and healthcare but not military spending. That we can't tax the super wealthy, or that an all-cuts budget makes sense.

More tests would reveal Prestidigitation susceptibility syndrome where we are prone to the sleight of hand that allow things like racial fear mongering to distract from true concerns.

A thorough set of scans would show GIBNIMBY's disease. (Great Idea, But Not In My Back Yard.)

And finally I'm confident a battery of tests would show society suffers from Persistent pervasive self-interest mal-alignment with ballot selection syndrome.

These illnesses are broad and I'm ashamed to say we all play our part in them. And the most vulnerable of us are often the most ill-affected by them. I'm also convinced we are the wellspring for solutions, cures for our ills.

But I want us to have a little sense of urgency. And I want us to be bold and valiant.

Because I see the health evidence of community inequity every day in the clinic. Asthma rates and severity are three times higher for kids coming to our clinic compared to more affluent communities. Every other chronic disease is the same.

Even more troubling to me, the rates of hypertension among children who come to our clinic is alarming.

After finishing medical school I thought essential hypertension was not a problem a pediatrician was going to need to manage.

But there it is, affecting too many kids. It means they will have it for life and it will likely diminish the quality and duration of their lives.

I realize that I put a lot of years into training in order to help kids live healthier lives and that the healthcare system too often positions itself too far downstream to really be helpful.

I realize that the high blood pressure reading, the severe asthma, the overweight, are all worse because of stress.

The every-day, constant and many-factored causes of stress are keeping the cortisol factories in their bodies turned on without relief or respite.

Cortisol, that arbiter of our fight or flight response, is corrosive to the body when it is never turned off.

I think Anton Chekov, the famous Russian playwright, was a closet neuroendocrinologist because he seemed to grasp this concept especially well. One of his most famous quotes goes something like, 'any idiot can handle a crisis, it's day to day living that wears you out'. He understood cortisol well.

And this stress has an especially harmful impact on the most critical stages in life, like a developing fetus. And also the amazing process of pregnancy for a woman.

This is where I find the evidence of the impact of stress most heart-wrenching.

If you look at infant mortality rates and rates of higher risk newborns within low income communities you find rates that are consistently higher than in higher income communities; sometimes two to three times higher.

Even more disconcerting; if you look at these rates by race you find that certain groups, like African American moms have higher rates regardless of income. In other words, an African American mom with post-graduate college education- a lawyer, a doctor, a professional- has a higher risk that her baby will not survive their first year of life than a mother from any other race who didn't finish high school.

These troubling truths are also true for the risks of a mother dying in pregnancy.

This should confuse and concern all of us deeply.

From a biomedical standpoint, this is about stress; the stress of poverty, the stress of racism and prejudice in this country.

Maya Angelou said something like, 'prejudice is a burden that confuses the past, threatens the future and renders the present inaccessible.'

The evidence of this prejudice, this stress and its effect on pregnancy can be seen in a report in California from 2002 that showed the rate of risky deliveries like low birth weight babies and premature deliveries went up significantly in March of that year. Six months after September 11th.

So when I think about the insidious impact of stress and cortisol production I come to some evident conclusions.

I think that we have to focus on strategies that help turn off that cortisol current.

We have to seek out and bend our combined energies to support efforts that reach as far upstream in a person's life as possible. Efforts that favorably impact the most critical, most influential periods, like pregnancy and early infancy.

We have to help turn off the cortisol.

We need to promote and support efforts that are rooted in the community, because those are the efforts that are the most informed, the most inclusive and the most relevant.

These difficult economic times, and believe me, we are still deep in these difficult times, especially for already under-resourced communities, we need to be especially thoughtful about investing in activities that provide the greatest return, the greatest bang for buck.

Looking at this current political trend in addition to state and local budgets that are cutting every service, we need to step up.

We can't rely on federal or state funds to support community needs or services, no matter how rational, effective or fundamental. It is up to us. We need to take personal responsibility for our communities.

We need to get serious about playing a direct role.

Today I think we all know we don't have the luxury of complacency.

I want us to actively help construct the tomorrow that our values talk about.

The best place to center our efforts is in programs that emphasize beginnings.

I think our best future relies on preparing as many young people as possible to be effective, cherished, contributing people.

This is why it makes so much sense to be here, today, supporting Open Arms.

I've been privileged to get to know the work of Open Arms and the people that make up this incredible organization.

Their work is foundational, fundamental and effective. In my doctor's perspective their work builds the kind of support into pregnancy and early infancy that helps turn off the cortisol.

The impact of this support appeals to the most pragmatic in this room because the telescoping effect of providing the best possible beginnings for mothers and infants cannot be outmatched.

Impact that spans a broad range of diversity in our communities. As one representative example, the staff are able to provide services in 15 different languages.

Their work during these important times appeals to the most compassionate among us because the opportunity to right the societal wrongs that make inequities vast is soul-enriching.

In addition, compassion is even helpful to those who are acting compassionately. I saw a study recently that showed compassionate people actually handled their own stresses better than uncompassionate people.

Open Arms appeals to the most strategic among us because we see a well-conceived, resource-efficient, clearly-envisioned and results-oriented organization

Open Arms resonates for those of us who recognize that any organization is only as strong as the people that constitute it. I am in awe of the whole team that makes up Open Arms. I've been especially impressed with Sheila. Her engaging leadership and thoughtful ability to distill complex issues are remarkable. Her broader vision is inspiring.

She challenges us to think a bit more. I got inspired when I read in the organization's January newsletter something she wrote: 'What if we welcomed all our children...with the knowledge of our common humanity; with love.'

She also inspired me when we were both at a conference recently where issues related to racial disparities in infant mortality were being discussed. Much of the audience was pondering which strategies might best help minorities achieve infant mortality rates on a par with majority culture.

How to narrow or eliminate the gap?

Sheila said, 'I think that is aiming low'. She went on to say, 'the US overall infant mortality is one of the worst in the world, why would we aspire to such a low bar?' Her broader perspective helped focus and align a group of people who are deeply involved and invested in this issue.

The staff at Open Arms are radiant souls.

I can't help but smile when I think about Michelle Sarju. For over a decade she has dedicated herself to empowering women by supporting them through a more natural, more respectful birthing experience.

I know she comes by her talents through her own hard work, enduring aspirations, and a heritage of midwifery that reaches back to her great grandmother in Oklahoma.

My heart is warmed when I think about the many doulas Open Arms partners with, some 70 in 2010, who carefully and lovingly attend to the social-emotional health of a woman going through pregnancy and giving birth.

Open Arms is the right focus, the right model, the just endeavor, and the right people.

I learned from Open Arms that Amnesty International has declared that the establishment, hospital based healthcare system has contributed to placing the US in maternal healthcare crisis.

Open Arms is playing an important role in undoing that crisis. The value of empowering mothers cannot be overstated. I work in a clinic named after an empowered mother; a clinic that is still going strong over 40 years later, so believe me, I respect that value.

And the effect of that empowerment is tangible. I feel I can see that difference when a mom who's been supported by a midwife brings her baby to see me in clinic.

Open Arms' work to turn off the cortisol is inspired by sensible creativity. The work harkens back to innovations like the incarcerated women's project that connected doulas to pregnant women in prison. I think ideas like that are transcendent. They help us break through limited views to address those issues others might want to ignore. Einstein said something like, 'logic will surely get you from A to B, but imagination will take you everywhere.'

I ask you to open your hearts, open your checkbooks, and reach beyond the complex societal challenges that can mire you in a sense of paralysis.

Reach beyond the mire and make the kind of contribution that will allow you to say, 'I am part of a solution'.

Knowing Open Arms is a bit professionally humbling for me. As I mentioned before, my traditional role in the medical system places me at risk for being too far downstream from the true causes, the challenges that keep that cortisol turned on. Our clinic has to fight arduously to move upstream even a little bit. Open Arms is there.

But it is also humbling to be reminded that my profession all too often takes the natural and tries to place a pathologic or illness lens on it. Open Arms promotes a natural, empowered birth.

Open Arms reminds me that people have an amazing capacity for depth and dimension you never might have known existed. (OK, with guilt I must confess that the last statement was actually a quote from the show Modern Family, guilty as charged).

As a physician, it is likely that my greatest opportunity to promote wellness is to be here, with you, contributing to the efforts of Open Arms.

Thank you,