



## Memorandum

**Date** June 12, 2020

**To:** WellSpace Health Colleagues

**From:** A. Jonathan Porteus, Ph.D.  
Chief Executive Officer

**Re:** Mid-Month Message: Vectors, Pandemics, and Racism – Part II

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Colleagues,

If I ask you whether you have been good about wearing your mask during this pandemic you would probably say “yes.” You may think of a few times when you should have worn it, but you have done pretty well.

If I ask you whose company you were in when you took your mask off and were within 6 feet you would say your family or loved ones. The ones you are closest to who you think are least likely to infect you, and you feel pretty sure you won’t infect them.

COVID-19 has washed over the planet. We fear it and we wear a mask more because we are protecting others from us than we do to protect us from others. Our success is linked to how quickly we have accepted that we are the vector for this pandemic. We have endured months of personal sacrifices to contain the danger we might spread. We have changed our institutions to contain our role as the vector. We have embraced epic unemployment and financial mayhem to control the pandemic. We have stopped national sports leagues. We have suspended graduations, vacations, conventions, most convocations. We have sheltered-in-place to avoid what happens when the virus runs rampant through our communities. We have ‘flattened the curve’ of death and life-threatening disease by seeing what each of us could do to shift it from being a runaway contagion to stifling it and insisting that it only finds its way through society when we let down our guard. Humanity has suffered the profound social and emotional impacts of denying our humanity in interest of containing COVID-19.

Have we talked about any other Coronaviruses like the flu recently? Why would we? The flu is not the deadly coronavirus we are focused on, it’s the ‘novel’ coronavirus we are focused on. In this case ‘novel’ means unknown, strange, frightening, something we have just discovered and we need to find a cure. So it’s not about whether other coronaviruses may matter right now, they have been addressed so much and will be addressed again in their right time. We are focused on the deadly unknown and our role as its vector. It’s the one right in front of us, it’s the one we don’t feel like we have solutions for. COVID-19 is the coronavirus that matters, and

humanity must adjust itself to flatten its deadly curve because we have embraced the fact that **we** are the most dangerous part of all of this. Why would we trivialize the deadly effects of the COVID-19 coronavirus by dragged all of our attention away from it and focusing on other coronaviruses?

Humanity has adjusted itself to manage this pandemic both at the personal level as well as in our institutions. The first step in our public health response has been to accept our role as a potentially deadly vector. We have all accepted our most deadly potential and worked on controlling it. And we have seen what happens where people have not embraced their role in the public health response to the pandemic, just as we see COVID-19 spiking up again in the last few days largely because families have been inclined to have large gatherings without masks or distance.

Changing society because we transmit something deadly that we cannot see is a pretty abstract thing. And if it is more deadly when we feel safe enough to kick back with our kin, what does that say about how pandemics plot their deadly course?

You probably realized where I was going quite a long time ago, or at least when I started writing that maybe this is not the time to say that “all coronaviruses matter” but to focus on the one that is most deadly right now, the one we still don’t have a vaccine for. The public health parallels of a ‘novel’ coronavirus and racism are striking. But while we seem to have a good global public health strategy outlined for containing the individual and institutional roles in the COVID-19 pandemic, we lack an effective public health strategy for addressing the individual and institutional components of the pandemic of racism. One core reality for both is that **we are the vectors.**

With COVID-19, we put on masks to address the fact that we are a vector, we ask what changes in behaviour and social hygiene we should go through to contain the vector, we address institutional factors that exacerbate the vector. So what are we doing with the pandemic of racism? What ‘mask’ are we putting on to address the fact that we are consciously or unconsciously transmitting racism? What changes in behaviour and social hygiene are we going through to contain racism? How are we addressing institutional factors that exacerbate or perpetuate racism?

In my first message last week I said I would next send out my belated February Mid-Month message about Black History. But in the time since then, we have been inundated again by arguments about what matters and attempts to dilute the current focus on black lives mattering. Is the flu important right now? Not when we are focused as much as we are on COVID-19. And would we insist on including the flu when people are intently focused on COVID-19? No, it would seem really strange. It’s just as strange to dilute the focus on black lives mattering. After 9/11 the population of London resounded with the statement “*We are New York!*” Nobody was running around England saying “*wait, what about London? What about the terrorism and bombings we have endured in London?*” They didn’t say “*We are every*

*city that has experienced terrorism!”* They said *“We are new York!”* And we say Black Lives Matter!

Understanding racism and our role as a vector does not appear as easy for us as addressing COVID-19. Asking *“what other issues should we also focus on?”* leaves us feeling good about ourselves being considerate and socially conscious, but we don’t end up putting on the mask that contains us as a vector for racism. So let’s start work on putting on the mask that contains us as the vector of racism.

The first two steps in getting to put on the mask are probably addressing the privilege we unknowingly carry, and understanding racism not necessarily as an ammunition we consciously fire at people, but most often as *implicit biases*, unconscious and engrained belief systems and sets of responses guiding our thinking and behavior.

With step one to putting on the mask, it’s important to see what we are supporting by not acting – best done by understanding privilege and the way we perpetuate it individually and in institutions. The way I do this is to remind myself of my invisible backpack....

In 1989 Peggy McIntosh, a white woman and leading researcher in male privilege realized that much of what she had discovered about the vector of male privilege was true about herself and her relationship to the world as a white person. She realized that our focus on ‘other’ groups let even universities and institutions of higher learning focus on ‘others’ through Women’s Studies and Ethnic Studies and other departments. But when you say ‘other’ you are making a comparison. ‘Other’ than what? And she saw in that question that the answer was ‘other than white.’ By being ‘inclusive’ of ‘others’ institutions were still not necessarily addressing the fact that they were perpetuating a paradigm of ‘us’ and ‘them.’ The institution was basically blind to its role in perpetuating a binary system. Individuals were moving through the world as if they were unaware that they were wearing an invisible backpack full of un-addressed privileges and the institution was acting like a white person and assuming it had the privileges of white people.

‘Putting on the mask’ on the face of the pandemic of racism means knowing the social ‘particulate matter’ the mask is designed to filter out. Specifically, if we are wearing a mask to stop us from unconsciously exhaling the building blocks of racism, what is it that we can become more mindful of that would reinforce our wearing the mask and increase our motivation to stop from being a vector. McIntosh summarized her insights as follows:

*“I decided to try to work on myself at least by identifying some of the daily effects of white privilege in my life. I have chosen those conditions which I think in my case attach somewhat more to skin-color privilege than to class, religion, ethnic status, or geographical location,*

*though of course all these other factors are intricately intertwined. As far as I can see, my African American co-worker, friends and acquaintances with whom I come into daily or frequent contact in this particular time, place, and line of work cannot count on most of these conditions”*

And then she simply outlined facts contained in the invisible backpack of privilege white people / members of the dominant culture carry:

1. I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my colour most of the time.
2. If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area which I can afford and in which I would want to live.
3. I can be pretty sure that my neighbours in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.
4. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
5. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my colour widely represented.
6. When I am told about our national heritage or about “civilization,” I am shown that people of my colour made it what it is.
7. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of people of their colour.
8. If I want to, I can be pretty sure of finding a publisher for this piece on white privilege.
9. I can go into a music shop and count on finding music representing my cultural group, into a supermarket and find the staple foods which fit with my cultural traditions, into a hairdresser’s shop and find someone who can cut my hair.
10. Whether it’s checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin colour not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.
11. I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.
12. I can swear, or dress in second hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, poverty, or the illiteracy of my colour.
13. I can speak in public to a powerful group without putting my colour on trial.
14. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to people of my colour.
15. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my ethnic group.
16. I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of colour who constitute the world’s majority without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion.
17. I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behaviour without being seen as a cultural outsider.
18. I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to “the person in charge,” I will be facing a person of my colour.
19. If a traffic cop pulls me over, I can be sure I haven’t been singled out because of my colour.

20. I can easily buy posters, postcards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys, and children's magazines featuring people of my colour.
21. I can go home from most meetings of organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, out-of-place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance, or feared.
22. I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having co-workers on the job suspect that I got it because of colour.
23. I can choose public accommodation without fearing that people of my colour cannot get in or will be mistreated in the places I have chosen.
24. I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help [or even get sick] my colour will not work against me.
25. If my day, week, or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it has racial overtones.
26. I can choose blemish cover or bandages in "flesh" colour and have them more or less match my skin.

I'm not going to get in to implicit bias here, and many of you might recall multiple messages about this in previous mid-month missives. First we need to stop and linger in this reality of privilege. Each of us needs to probe ourselves, our colleagues, the people we love on the 26 items listed above. These are the elements we transmit as a vector. I would ask that each of you take it seriously, especially those of you who, like me, are a part of the dominant cultural group. I will reflect on the 26 items and I commit to talking each one through with my teenaged children and will forward and discuss with at least two of my friends. I'll also try to add to the list.

Let us start there.

Be well,

Jonathan

***The "Mid-Month Message" is intended as a place to share pieces of our organizational culture and/or history. As our tagline says, WellSpace Health has been providing care in our community since 1953. Over the decades we have developed quite an organizational culture. We have had many accomplishments, created histories, have profoundly affected so many, and have been profoundly affected by so many. Sometimes it's hard to keep up with it all. And often, one part of the organization may not know about something affecting another part of the organization.***