

Letter From the Editor

# The Odd Couple

## *At the union of cancer and social justice*

When I describe *Cancer InCytes* to friends and colleagues, I admit that my words are often met with puzzled looks and questions about what can be described as an 'odd marriage' of cancer and social justice issues. However, as with any marriage, the strength of the union can be found at the core, in the common ground. A major focus of *Cancer InCytes* is the overlap between cancer and social justice, and in a larger view, healthcare and social justice. One of our core missions is to shine light on the injustice in these areas.

While I was always somewhat aware of the disparity in healthcare across different demographics, the severity of the situation became concrete for me after I became aware of the Africa Oxford Cancer Foundation. Their work compelled me to get a grasp of the situation, and as I dug through the published literature, I was astonished at not only the facts and figures (e.g., by 2020, over half of the estimated 16 million new cases of cancer annually will be from developing nations), but also the poor treatment options that are available for cancer patients in the developing world. Care that we take for granted in the United States is wishful thinking in other regions. This is evidenced by the mortality and incidence rates in these regions; a dis-

ease like cervical cancer, which is screened for regularly in the United States, is more deadly in developing regions due to a lack of screening and treatment options. When faced with facts such as these, it's easy to see that there is a common ground between cancer and social justice that needs to be addressed.

As I write this editorial, I'm also watching a documentary on PBS entitled "*Half the Sky: Turning Oppression Into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*," based on the book of the same name by Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn. One topic in this documentary is the victimization of young teenage girls into sex slavery, an issue that should wrench the heart and turn the stomach of anyone that has a pulse. Awareness of the emotional and physical needs of trafficking victims is growing, but much remains to be understood. It would be an understatement to say that these young girls, as well as any trafficking victims, probably have very poor (if any) access to healthcare. Add in the sexual transmission of human papilloma virus (HPV) as a causative agent for cervical cancer, and you have a situation with thousands of young women at higher risk of cancer and limited access to the care that could save their lives. Even worse, their captors

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don't care. This is only one illustration, but this is the injustice that drives me to support *Cancer InCytes* and the fight against human trafficking. The health care needs of trafficked persons – as with other public health concerns such as the link between cigarette smoke and lung cancer – require that we raise awareness to treat the root cause. Our focus must be on dissuading people from smoking instead of just trying to treat the severe consequences. For trafficking victims, we must strive to end slavery in addition to attending to the needs of recovering victims. This is the common ground at the union of cancer and social justice. As we highlight those bringing the fight to this area through improved understanding of cancer, improved treatments and combating of trafficking, we hope that this is the injustice that will drive you to join us as well.

Sincerely,



Steve Mason, Ph.D.

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