

*By James Walker*

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# Vaccine? Sorry, I have to say no

I have spent the last week wondering how I could convey my thoughts about not taking a vaccine that is presumably coming to rescue the nation from the death and destruction of COVID-19.

And I admit, I am finding it very difficult.

How do you explain mistrust and fear of the medical community when doctors, nurses and other members of the health care profession are down in the trenches — and some have died to keep us alive from this dreaded disease?

Sometimes, being inside my head when I am wrestling with a problem is a battle royal; and in this case, it is common sense versus experience.

And experience is winning, though common sense tells me it shouldn't.

Let me explain how I have gotten to this point.

In 1982, I lay on a gurney in the emergency room at a New York hospital with my stomach in a bloody mess.

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I had been mugged and stabbed very badly.

I was rapidly losing blood when I arrived at the hospital, courtesy of a Southerner visiting New York who ignored the blood destroying his white suit as he helped me get there.

But while I lay on that gurney, there was no apparent hustle from medical personnel to save my life.

In fact, based on the conversations, they believed I had been stabbed due to a drug deal that had gone bad.

When I was asked for next of kin, I made a decision that I believe to this day saved my life: I gave them the phone number to my boss, though I had just begun to work for his company.

And when they finished talking to him and came back to me lying on that gurney, the hustle was on.

I immediately was taken to the operating room where they removed my damaged gallbladder and stitched and stapled me back to health.

Four days later, I was released with medical personnel smiling at my good fortune.

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But I have never forgotten those emotional moments lying on that gurney when I thought I was going to die.

And I have never forgotten I would have left this earth with my family believing I was dead as a result of a drug deal gone bad.

Because that was the narrative of medical personnel, who were making a determination based on stereotypical beliefs, not fact.

That was when my red light to health care began flashing, even though my life was saved.

But it was not my first warning.

That came a long time ago, when I was a little boy and my father warned me and my siblings to be careful of the medications that doctors wanted to put in our bodies.

I am sure his warning had everything to do with what is known as the Tuskegee Experiment on syphilis. It was, without a doubt, the defining moment in how the Black community views health care and, more importantly, how we feel the medical community views us as dispensable.

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By now, everyone knows the medical community allowed many of these men to die by deliberately withholding the penicillin that could have saved their lives, until they became disabled or died.

Why? The medical profession wanted to study the full progression of the disease. The men who died were secondary to their scientific analysis.

So, when my father passed along his advice, I am sure his feelings were based on what happened to those men.

But mine are not. They are based on a feeling of alienation and questionable decisions over the years by doctors as they pertained to my medical needs — and they have been numerous.

My burned hand, which a burn expert advised me needed an immediate skin graft after a horrific accident, is just the latest piece of advice I am glad I ignored. It has healed on its own, rather than looking like a surgically grotesque caricature of its former self.

To readers, the three reasons I have cited here may not justify my mistrust of the medical community, particularly as we face a national emergency.

But it is not just me.

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One of the big questions surrounding the coronavirus is whether Black Americans will take part in experimental trials to ensure the vaccine will work for them — and, perhaps, more importantly, will they take the vaccine when it becomes available.

I don't know, but I know my mistrust is shared with other Black people. I have already answered that question where I am concerned and as I have said, I wrestled with the decision.

But doctors also recommend getting a flu shot and I don't get those, either.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, a name synonymous with the health and well-being of the nation, recently said he believed an effective and safe vaccine will be here by the end of the year or beginning of 2021.

Most people are praying for that vaccine to arrive in time to help them and loved ones stay alive.

And common sense tells me that when the vaccine becomes available, it is a no-brainer to get it into my system as fast as possible to protect myself as well as others.

But this isn't about common sense; it is about experience and broken trust.

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And yet, I can't help but wonder if that experience will cause me to eventually reap what the medical community has sown.

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