

By James Walker

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Yale? Dear Mr. Walker

Answering the call for the betterment of people

Nearly seven years ago, I was given an opportunity to write columns — and more importantly, free rein to write about what was on my mind.

And I was controversial right out the gate.

I am opinionated and I went at it full force, determined to have my say and not shy away from social problems that nobody was talking about.

And whether those opinions were well received by readers or rubbed them the wrong way, I stayed true to what I believed and had experienced in life, rather than follow that hollow trail of meaningless oratory.

That is why I was stunned at an email I received on Sept. 15 in response to my column, “Vaccine? Sorry, I have to say no.”

The email was straightforward and to the point, but still, I read it three times to make sure I was correctly comprehending its message.

It was not only a tribute to my work, but it came from a group of people I never expected to hear from — unless it was to read me the riot act.

And I admit, what they had to say blew me away:

“Dear Mr. Walker,

“We are writing to you on behalf of many colleagues to thank you for your deeply moving and important Commentary article in the New Haven Register on August 23.

“We represent a group of infectious disease physicians and other health care workers at Yale who have been involved in caring for patients with COVID-19 during the past months.

“We are enormously appreciative of your candor and the difficult balance of ‘common sense and experience and broken trust’ that has brought you to the decision to not accept a vaccine for this novel coronavirus (if and when one becomes available).

“Your article reflected what many of our patients feel, a longstanding sense of mistrust of the health care system. We appreciate that this is common and deeply held among the Blacks, LatinX and native communities.

“We affirm its legitimacy, given the past and continuing history of social and structural racism and inequities and human rights abuses that have resulted in their greater health risks and poorer health outcomes, so glaringly revealed during the present COVID-19 epidemic in its disproportionate effect on these communities and among the patients for whom we have provided care.

“We are deeply committed to changing this and to fully and equitably providing the benefits of good health and medical care.

“We also feel as health care professionals, that we are currently insufficiently trained, informed or experienced to fully and appropriately appreciate, address and reverse these injustices.

“However, we are determined to begin, and your article has provided a starting point.

“We are hoping that we can meet with you and have an open ended, fruitful and ongoing conversation about these issues and explore with you how we might better understand the challenges, and appropriately with focused strategies, act to help improve health, reduce disparities in health care and begin to restore trust by the Black community and yes, even successfully

provide an acceptable, safe and effective vaccine for this and other diseases that so unequally affect the Black and other at risk communities.

“We know this is a long term and very tall order, but we are anxious to meet with you, as a first step, to start a dialogue and discuss further. We hope that you will agree.

“We are also planning a series of trainings for ourselves and our colleagues in infectious diseases and general medicine, establishing a curriculum focusing on the specific issues of racism and biases in health and medical care and their elimination.

“We would also like to ask you to consider participating in a meaningful way in this larger forum. We hope that you will consider this as well.

“Thank you again for your article and the deeply personal story and powerful message that you provided.”

The letter was signed by Dr. Gerald Friedland, Professor Emeritus, Internal Medicine (Infectious Diseases), Epidemiology and Public Health, Yale School of Medicine; and Dr. Heidi Zapata, assistant professor of medicine (Infectious Diseases), Yale School of Medicine.

I don't think anyone who doesn't have a string of associations following their name could receive such an email and not be tremendously honored.

Yale is recognized as one of the most prestigious universities in the world. It attracts and hires some of the most brilliant minds in the world — and they have asked for my help.

But even as I swelled with pride to be considered, it also gave me pause.

I've been around long enough to know when it comes to my race, knee-jerk reactions that go nowhere follow a society trying to overcompensate for past mistakes.

And I wanted no part of that.

It also would not be the first time I have been asked to participate in something only to be given the cold shoulder when they realize my opinion would not be compromised.

But if there was a chance to honestly make a difference and bridge the gap between the medical and Black communities, that was something I wanted to be part of, so I agreed to start the conversation.

And while I was wary at first, I am glad I did.

We've had two extensive meetings where we talked about my participation and exchanged ideas on how we could move forward.

And the meetings have left me convinced there is a sincere willingness from that group of doctors at Yale to reduce disparities in health care.

I am also convinced — as they are — a tough road lies ahead to achieve it as there are so many variables.

It will be a big undertaking that will be time-consuming and demand a lot of resources. But the doctors have assured me they are looking into grants to ensure resources are there for me and the team I assemble. And that means I might also be compensated.

My opinions are my own and my columns have never been about playing the Pied Piper. They're about getting people to think and talk about the problems and issues we face as a society.

I think most people want to do something in their lives that makes a difference — and given the opportunity, would do so.

I don't have all the answers and I have no idea how much good I can do.

But I do know that I share a common mistrust of the medical community with other people of color — and I know that mistrust must be broken down.

When the doctors at Yale asked me how they should begin to mend the relationship between them and people of color, I told them it was best to start the way any meaningful relationship should begin — by being honest.

That is what led them to me.

It is a long road from being an abused kid living in a project who no one wanted to listen to, to being asked to step forward and let my voice be heard for the betterment of people.

And I have decided, I will answer that call.

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