Viral Hepatitis: The Burdens We Carry

July 16, 2018 By Lucinda K. Porter RN

Recently, I received the following email (some of the details have been changed to protect the person who emailed me):

> Hi Lucinda,
>
> Thank you for your encouragement for people confronting the challenges of hepatitis. I have always wanted to be a doctor. However, I am a person who has been living with hepatitis B for my entire life. My health is fine, but I am worried about the stigma, discrimination and challenges I'll face when applying to medical school. I'm wondering how you were able to surmount these challenges.
>
> Thanks,
>
> X

Hi X,

I have always found it easier to live an open life than being afraid of what others think. However, I have faced some consequences as a result of this. All told, the benefits have far exceeded the consequences. But I didn't come out of the hep closet until after I began to work in this field. I kept my mouth shut when I was a floor nurse. I knew that standard precautions would protect my patients from acquiring hepatitis C from me, but I also knew that misinformed people would overreact.

Also, my situation is different. You don't say much about your background, but since you have hep B, perhaps your mother is Asian or African? I am white, US born, and acutely aware of the privileges this brings. Plus, hep C isn't transmitted efficiently in the health care setting. I don't know what choices I would have made if I was in your shoes. Presumably, you will be tested for hepatitis B, and will need to live with the entrance guidelines for the program you are applying to.

You aren't asking my advice, but I do hope for you that you feel like you can share your truth with some trusted people (such as what you did here). And make your health a top priority. Continue to follow your doctor's advice regarding hep B so your viral load is suppressed, and try to not let HBV define or consume you.

Thank you for writing.

Peace and health,

Lucinda

May we all be able to live with dignity and respect, especially through illness and injury. Don’t let disease define you.

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