



Practicing anti-racism as a health science professional

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By Easter Tocol, HSA member



“Where are you from? No, where are you really from?”

“I’m not a racist, I have so many friends of colour.”

“Well, shouldn’t all lives matter?”

These are just some of the racist microaggressions that I hear every day in the workplace.

It is usually not meant to hurt, and is done with little awareness. Over time, these comments can have a negative impact on people’s mental and physical health creating a toxic work environment.

I’ve been working in the social services field for over 20 years. I’ve met and cared for people in all walks of life. Like myself, we all have a story or set of experiences that have shaped our lives. Without these, we would not be who we are and be able to do the wonderful work we do.

However, working with vulnerable populations in traumatic crisis situations on a daily basis, you come face to face with how racism is so predominant in our lives and within our systems. The stress and pressures in the environments that we work in bring out so many feelings and emotions in people, taking a toll on all of us.

I’m not perfect, but strive to be a better social work practitioner. In HSA, I believe we all share this motivation. We want to make our patients, their family members, and our colleagues feel safe. This involves learning and seeking to understand how racism affects people.

If we want to treat patients better, then we must understand their background, belief systems, values, generational history, and life experiences, including past interactions with the healthcare system. This is essential in assessing and intervening in our clients’ lives more effectively.

In BC, I am grateful to have the opportunity to work in diverse communities. We are immersed with so many wonderful cultures and different perspectives on what life and living means. These communities need us to

practice anti-racism more than ever. When they need our services, they need us to understand, listen, and be open to how their life journeys and past experiences play a direct role in their health status.

As we unpack racism and our own privileges, we can better understand ourselves and how we identify with others. This is how we will learn and grow.

We as health science professionals are often taking the lead in being advocates for our clients. We, as a collective can also take the lead in making system changes through the labour movement in addressing social justice and equality issues for workers.

I would like to commend HSA for launching the recent report, "Confronting racism with solidarity: An analysis of the 2020 HSA Workplace Racism Survey." Over 200 HSA members identifying as Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour completed a survey on workplace racism this past winter, and the report, released in August, explores the survey results.

Some of the key findings of the report included how racist remarks and behaviours at work are so prevalent and so real for many of our colleagues. Racism impacts the emotional and psychological wellbeing of workers, making it an occupational health and safety hazard. It saddened me to see that formal reporting was low due to fear of reprisal. Union members rarely seek assistance from representatives for issues of workplace racism.

I was given the opportunity to review this report and I encourage you all to have a read. It can be found on the HSA website at hsabc.org/RacismAtWork. This report is a reminder that we need to practice awareness. I don't seek to call out anyone, but I do want to call you all in. Let's be mindful of our bias and understand how it affects our behaviour.

The results of the survey have made it clear: We have a lot of work to do. Not only is it an individual action, but a collective one. To be better at anything involves learning and practice. Change is always inevitable in our lives. As health care professionals, let's take the lead to make anti-racism practice a priority for us and our patients.

Work is underway right now within our union to address racial injustices in our workplaces. Members have initiated a Black, Indigenous, Person of Colour (BIPOC) caucus to engage its members on anti-racism initiatives in our union and in the workplace. If you are interested in being part of some of our initiatives, you can contact me at etocol@steward.hsabc.org.

Tips for dealing with racism:

1. Go Slow, Listen more than you talk.
2. Ask questions with respect by checking in with people.
3. Own Your Privilege.
4. Seek personal help. Debrief your feelings with others. Educate yourself.
5. Kindness creates space for others to share.

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