

“Do You Have the Coronavirus?”

By Henry Fok, SPT

Congratulations to Columbia University Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons Doctor of Physical Therapy Program graduate student Henry Fok, SPT, a finalist in the annual physical therapy student essay contest co-sponsored by the ACAPT Consortium for the Humanities, Ethics, and Professionalism (CHEP) and JHR. This writing competition is designed to encourage deep thinking by students about the role and value of humanities, ethics, and professionalism in academic training and professional life. The fourth in an annual series, the CHEP-JHR essay contest offers a creative opportunity to ignite critical reflection in PT students across the nation, to support holistic approaches to patient care. This year's essay prompt was, "2020 is defined by crises and uncertainties related to the COVID-19 pandemic and racial tensions. These impact the moral, social, political and economic foundations of our world, nation, and the profession of physical therapy. Navigating one's professional identity and formation during this time is undoubtedly challenging, and you may have had unexpected, yet impactful interactions as a result. Describe an experience that significantly impacted your professional growth and identity as a future physical therapist, with respect to the public health crises of racism and/or COVID-19. What about this encounter was instructive? In what ways did this experience enlighten your perspective on one or more of the core values of our profession?"

“Do you have the coronavirus?” It was a question I might have expected from a doctor, or perhaps a friend if I were showing signs of symptoms. But the context in which I received it did not come from a place of care or concern. From my perspective as an Asian-American, the question came from a place of ethnic bias reinforced by the racial tensions and paranoia escalated by the coronavirus pandemic.

THE SETTING

At the beginning of March, I travelled to Miami with my fiancé to attend the wedding of my best friend from college. At the time, there were only a small number of reported cases of the coronavirus in the United States and the severity of the disease was still not palpable to the public. California and New York had not yet issued stay-at-home orders, and President Trump had not yet issued a national emergency; that would all come a week and a half later. Likewise, my trip came before the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention put in place recommendations to limit gatherings. At that point in March when I was in Miami, the virus seemed isolated in the US and hardly the threat it would soon reveal itself to be.

I had been looking forward to my friend's wedding and was in a celebratory mood as I arrived at the beautiful

wedding venue with my fiancé. As we made our way to the entrance, there was a table with a pair of guest books and pens laid out, and we stopped to write our messages to the bride and groom. I finished writing my loving note, recounting the happy memories the groom and I shared in college, and just as I set my pen down, I heard the question.

THE ENCOUNTER

“Do you have the coronavirus?” I looked to my left; a middle-aged woman was standing beside me. I didn’t know how to answer. The tone of her voice was genuine but the question insincere. I stood there and stared at her incredulously as I tried to reason why she would ask point-blank if I had the coronavirus. She added, “Because if you have the coronavirus, I wouldn’t want to use the same pen to sign the guest book.” All I could muster was a firm, “No.”

Even though I was able to enjoy the rest of the evening and celebrate my friend’s special day, later the incident nagged at me. From my perspective, the woman’s question was a joke disguised as an ethnic slur. I can’t imagine this person would have asked the same question to someone who was not Asian-American. But during that encounter, I couldn’t think of what to say besides “No!”—and move on.

COMPLICITY

I appreciate that the coronavirus pandemic has heightened anxiety and increased people’s concern for personal safety, and that the World Health Organization, to partly avoid the public associating the virus with a particular ethnic or racial group, proposed “COVID-19” as the official name for the disease caused by the coronavirus. On the other hand, President Trump had repeatedly blamed China for the spread of the virus, calling it both “the Chinese virus”

and “the kung flu” during rallies and news conferences. When a national leader stokes anti-Asian sentiment, it is no coincidence that Asian-Americans report being treated differently or experiencing racial slurs, or even violence, as a result of the global health crisis. Although seemingly a small incident, my short interaction at the wedding has had a lasting impact on me.

At the time, stunned by the question, perhaps I was wise enough to shrug off the insult. But perhaps I did not have the courage to speak up and explain to the individual why her question was inappropriate and, in fact, offensive. To be morally silent is to be complicit.

IDENTITY AND PROFESSIONALISM

This experience of COVID-19-related racism has increased awareness of my own identity as an Asian-American. As a future physical therapist, it is not farfetched to imagine that I will be confronted with racial discrimination in my line of work. Perhaps a patient will seek another therapist because he or she does not want to be treated by an Asian-American; or perhaps I will encounter racial discrimination within my work setting. What would I do, I’ve asked myself, and how would I act when faced with racial discrimination?

I related the incident to a friend when I returned from Miami, and he—by chance also an Asian-American—had sound advice. He suggested that the next time I am faced with an offensive joke, I should tell the person, “I don’t understand your joke. May you please explain yourself?” In this way, the aggressor is forced to question his or her own behavior and attitudes and realize how discriminatory those types of remarks are.

As a budding healthcare professional and a future educator and leader, I have a moral responsibility to do all I can to fight systemic racism, especially as I will be

interacting with many people with various beliefs and behaviors. I need to hold myself accountable to times I, too, may have made insensitive comments, and challenge myself to reflect on whether I hold implicit biases that may potentially interfere with my role as a healthcare provider. By doing so, I hope to be morally sensitive to the values, beliefs and expectations of my patients, and equipped and prepared to confront those who are intolerant of my identity and opinions.

REFLECTION—AND OPPORTUNITY

After completing this narrative and reading and re-reading my words, I conclude that none of us is free from bias or prejudice. I realize that I have been making assumptions about the intentions of the individual who posed the question, when in fact, I really did not know this person’s intentions because I

did not ask. This realization presents a lesson: We should have the moral courage to calmly confront individuals whose questions or statements are perceived as hurtful and offensive; otherwise, no insight is gained.

To confront should not be conceived as negative, but as a constructive opportunity to create a shared space for dialogue. Thoughtful communication is a way to bring strangers—those who share different values and beliefs based on cultures, ethnicities, and race—together. Yes, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated divisions and fostered distrust in our country, to the shame of political leaders who perpetuated those divisions for political purposes. But it has also been an opportunity for renewed understanding and transparency.

About the Author



Henry Fok, SPT is currently a Doctor of Physical Therapy candidate at Columbia University Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons. Previously, he earned a Bachelor of Architecture at Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in New York City and worked in the field of architecture and design. Henry has been Head Coach of Cooper Union’s intercollegiate varsity soccer team for the past eight years, and his experience of motivating athletes on a daily basis and helping them achieve their physical goals has inspired him to pursue a second career in physical therapy.