

Ebel: Hate is a Public Health Issue

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(Photo: Submitted photo)

Prompted by the recent tragic events in Charlottesville, Virginia, the American College of Physicians (ACP) took a position recognizing hate crimes as a public health issue.

In its new policy statement, the ACP sees an important role for physicians to educate the public that hate crimes are a public health concern, exacting a toll on the health of those directly victimized and on the health of entire communities. The impacts of hate result in health inequities and disparities that prevent our citizens and communities from achieving optimal health and wellness.

When we see reports of attacks motivated by hate in the news, such as mass shootings and other hate-related crimes, it stirs emotions and grabs our attention. And like most public health issues, the number of reported injuries and deaths linked to bigotry, hate and discrimination is just the tip of the iceberg. We know from experience that the vast majority of the damaging health impacts such as depression, hypertension, stress, cardiovascular disease and even death, often hide below the surface of our public consciousness.

Declaring hate as a public health issue is not an overreaction nor is it an exaggeration of the mental and physical problems that can result from victimization. Treating hate-based violence as a public health concern allows us to apply the same tools we have successfully used to stop the spread of infections and reduce the impacts of disease and injury for decades.

Rates of depression, suicidal thoughts, stress, high blood pressure, anxiety and other negative health conditions are higher among populations that experience hate crimes, discrimination, and bullying. Health disparities linked to Social Determinants of Health (the social structures and economic systems that influence health), are often rooted in discrimination of racial and ethnic minorities in America who have less access to quality care and have worse health outcomes and lower life expectancies.

Our country has the resources and capacity to address this public health crisis but much like quitting smoking, or losing weight, the big question is, do we have the willpower to tackle hate as a disease, or will we just keep waiting for the next "magic pill" to treat the symptoms?

The Licking County Health Department joins the ACP, the Ohio Public Health Association, the American Medical Association, the American Public Health Association and others in the clinical and public health professions who have taken a stand to oppose prejudice, discrimination, harassment and violence against individuals based on their race, ethnic origin, ancestry, gender, gender identity, nationality, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, cultural background, age, disability, or religion. The door is open for others to join us.

Submitted by Licking County Health Commissioner, Joe Ebel, R.S., M.S., M.B.A.

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