

*Health in All Matters* podcast

*If Not Now, When? | Racism: A 400-year public health emergency*

**Episode 1: Flashpoint**

*Airdate: October 15, 2020*

*Duration: 23:04*

*[Opening music]*

*News Clip: “It’s such disturbing video: George Floyd handcuffed, lying on his stomach, with a police officer’s knee on his neck for nearly 9 minutes as he begs for breath.”*

**Andrea Jenkins:** I think the blatant disregard for human life really touched a very human core of all of us: Profound sadness ... anger ... fear ... and just a really deep emotional concern for my community.

*News Clip: “Thousands of people around the world have gathered to protest the death of George Floyd, including here in Berlin - the German Capital - where artists have spray-painted this mural. Some of Floyd’s last words - ‘I can’t breathe’ - are now being chanted by protestors around the world.”*

**Andrea Jenkins:** I was surprised by the enormity of the response to the murder of George Floyd because as an African American, as a trans-identified woman, I had been seeing these kinds of videos on a pretty daily diet.

**Michael Joyce:** Andrea, why don’t you introduce yourself and tell us what your vocations and avocations are ... and what your connection is to the site of Mr. Floyd’s murder: the corner of 38th Street & Chicago Avenue, just south of downtown Minneapolis.

**Andrea Jenkins:** My name is Andrea Jenkins. I’m the vice president of the Minneapolis city council. I’m a poet, a writer, a performance artist. I live one-and-a-half blocks from the intersection of 38th and Chicago. And I’ve lived here for the past 22 years. I have been actively involved in changing the trajectory of that intersection for two decades. I was just there this past Sunday. There is absolutely a shrine, it’s a beautiful shrine: A black power fist raised up from the center of the intersection. There is a pop-up vegetable garden that has emerged. There’s a meditation booth. The art continues to grow. We hope to turn that memorial into a permanent memorial that honors the history of this moment — and this movement —

because this is much more than a moment. It is a movement. The murder of George Floyd was not futile. It sparked an international revolution to really begin to challenge the structural racism, the structural white supremacy, the structural inequities in our society. And begin to change and shift those.

*[Interlude]*

**Nar2:** I'm Michael Joyce, host of the "Health in All Matters" podcast from the University of Minnesota School of Public Health. We'll get back to city council member Andrea Jenkins later in the podcast. Our school is about 4 miles from where George Floyd was murdered. So for us, the racial inequalities brought to light by his death landed, quite literally, close to home. We decided to call this new series: "*If Not Now, When? | Racism: A 400-year Public Health Emergency.*" This first episode is called '**Flashpoint.**' Here's our dean, John Finnegan:

**John Finnegan:** So, I'll tell you what I think a public health emergency is. I believe it means that people's lives are so deeply and widely threatened by a disease or disaster, that it demands every level of collective action you can think of. It's really all-hands-on-deck because people are injured and dying ... lots of people.

In public health collective action and prevention at the community level really matters to us. So does social justice. We're the ones who DO see the forest through the trees.

By May 25th of this year, there were over 21,000 cases of coronavirus in Minnesota. It had been raging since March. Nearly 900 Minnesotans were dead. We already knew at that time that it was taking a heavier toll on black, indigenous, and other people of color. And then on that same day, police in Minneapolis killed George Floyd. Millions saw it on a phone video. It was as horrific, callous, and as gruesome as it gets.

And that was the flashpoint: a global pandemic we haven't seen the likes of in a century, colliding with the longest, deepest and most widespread public health disaster of all: racism.

All of a sudden, the misery, the anger, and the outrage exploded — not for the first time — but it put racism, once again, front and center. And there was a rush to label it a crisis or an emergency. But what does that really mean for an injustice that has plagued us for centuries? That's what we explore in this first episode of our new series.

The focus for the entire series is this: Why is racism a public health issue? We want to share the stories of the people who are making a difference. We'll explore what lessons we might learn from our complex past and our pivotal present. And what can public health change to drive us toward an awakened future?

*[Interlude]*

**Sandro Galea:** Public health, fundamentally, is about creating the conditions for people to be healthy. What public health teaches us is that we can not be healthy, I can not be healthy, you can not be healthy, we can not be healthy unless there are conditions around us that allow health to emerge. And those conditions include forces of exclusion like racism.

**Michael Joyce:** Dr. Sandro Galea is a physician and Dean of the School of Public Health at Boston University. He's written extensively about the social forces, or determinants, of our health. At the time I interviewed Dr. Galea roughly 130 U.S. states, cities, and counties had declared racism a public health crisis or emergency.

**Sandro Galea:** I want to be cautious about the use of the word 'emergency,' if it implies that this has now become an emergency. I think this has been an important issue that has been at the heart of public health for decades and centuries. Now: Can we afford to ignore it? And I think that is exactly the right question. The point is that the forces in the world around us, that affect our health, are non-ignorable.

Let me tell you a metaphor that I use often: The metaphor of the goldfish in the bowl.

Say you have a goldfish in a bowl and you want your goldfish to be healthy. So you tell this goldfish to exercise; swim around the bowl clockwise and counter-clockwise. You tell it to be careful of what it eats, so it doesn't eat too much and gain weight. So you're telling the goldfish to do all these good things to look after itself.

And then your goldfish still dies. And then you realize that the reason the goldfish dies is you didn't change its water. So water is the world around us. It is the forces around us that without them aligning to promote our health we will never be healthy no matter what we do. And I think racism is just like that. It is in the water.

Fundamentally it is shaping the opportunity structures that generate health. It is in the water and it has been for decades and centuries.

**Michael Joyce:** "I've been really trying to wrap my head and heart around 'structural racism.' And I came up with this quote that I want to bounce off of you for critique. I've come to think of structural racism as this:

“Through policies, procedures, and laws that go back over 400 years in this country (and millennia globally) ... at the local, state, and federal levels ... people of color have been deliberately disadvantaged when it comes to opportunities related to education, finances, public safety, and health care access ... and even the most basic human rights of healthy food, shelter, and water.”

Am I in the ballpark? Am I missing something here?

**Sandro Galea:** I think that is a fair definition. I think you're saying we have created a society which deliberately excludes some, in this case people of color. And I like the choice of the word 'deliberate' because one of the points I often make in my writing and speaking is that we are choosing to create this kind of world. I think people often bristle when I say that, and say: 'Well, I'm not choosing it!' But my point is we are choosing it if we consent to a society with its private and public sector structures that continue to reinforce conditions that exclude some groups from the opportunities that ultimately generate health.

That fundamentally excludes people from being 'health haves,' and that creates 'health- haves' and 'health have-nots.'

**Michael Joyce:** “That fundamentally pollute the water of the goldfish?”

**Sandro Galea:** Correct. That fundamentally pollute the water of the goldfish. And we are all the goldfish in the bowl.

*[Interlude]*

**Michael Joyce:** Since the murder of George Floyd how many interviews are you averaging a week?

**Georges Benjamin:** Oh, about 4-5 a day.

**Michael Joyce:** Wow! How does that compare to last summer?

**Georges Benjamin:** (laughs) Not many. Ah, you know, about 10 a month maybe.

*[Couple beats of music]*

**Georges Benjamin:** I'm Dr. Georges Benjamin. I'm an internist and emergency physician by training and experience. And I'm the executive director of the American Public Health Association, and in my 18th year there.

**Georges Benjamin:** I'm an ER doc and so I think of emergencies as anything that is serious and a dangerous situation. And clearly racism and all its component parts fill that definition. It hurts people and kills people. So it unfairly undermines the health of the stigmatized population, for sure. And at the end of the day the whole society loses because you've lost the healthy output of people who could really contribute to society. So we all lose because of that.

So when I talk about 'RACISM' I talk about it being in 3 buckets.

First of all, the one we always talk about is personally mediated racism. That's someone who doesn't like you. They think they are better than you, and want to diminish you. That's the Klu Klux Klan. That's the hate group. That's the group that wants to stigmatize another race or group of people because they believe it gives them some kind of advantage.

The second one, of course, is 'structural racism'. And that's because of the society we designed. If one goes back to 1619 when we first brought slaves to this country, the nation has strived to keep, particularly African Americans - through policies and procedures - in the condition as close to slavery, in many ways, as we had back in 1619.

And then finally, this whole issue of 'internalized racism,' where you take a group that has been stigmatized for so long, they begin to believe the myth of their own inferiority. This is the person who has been told — 'you can't be a doctor, you can't be a nurse, you can't be a teacher' — and they believe it, so they don't try to achieve.

**Michael Joyce:** You mention myths and throughout my life I've run into many people that, When I try to explain to them that the leading causes of death in the Western World — Heart disease, cancer, and lung disease ... as well as two of the more damaging chronic diseases (diabetes and hypertension) — all of those disproportionately affect people of color. And they say to me: 'Well, that's genetics or behavior. That has nothing to do with structural racism.' What do you say to someone who comes back with something like that?

**Georges Benjamin:** They're wrong! Structural racism is real. It's the neighborhood. When I was health commissioner in Washington, DC, Ward 8 didn't have a grocery store. When they designed the metro system, interestingly, the metro system didn't go to Ward 8 either. (Not in the way one would think.) It's not easy to get out of Ward 8 and go to a grocery store But what they DID have in Ward 8 is a lot of corner grocery stores that sold tobacco, alcohol, and high caloric/high fat/low nutritious foods.

So when you've done two shifts for the day, and you're going home, and you're going to get something to eat. You're not going to stop off at the local grocery store, because there isn't one in your community.

**Michael Joyce:** I'm wondering: Are we sleeping? Are we ignorant? Are we in denial? Why the inaction or, at least, the inconsistent action? What do you think?

**Georges Benjamin:** Well, at the end of the day it's all about power, right? About trying to maintain the status quo, and everybody feeling (who are the powerful) that they're somehow going to lose something, because people of color gain something.

One of the things I've learned in practicing medicine is the first thing you have to do is identify the problem. And so we have to name racism. We have to stop being afraid of the R-word.

We have to call it like we see it. We have to say this is what racism is. This is what it looks like. We have to understand what it is. Then we have to ask ourselves how does it operate here? And once we have a sense that it's here, and how it operates in a particular situation, then we can decide on crafting meaningful solutions. And prioritizing them. But you can not solve a problem until you know you have a problem, and everyone accepts that the problem is real.

*[Interlude]*

**Andrea Jenkins:** I do believe racism is a public health crisis.

**Michael Joyce:** Again, Minneapolis city council member Andrea Jenkins.

**Andrea Jenkins:** The number of unarmed black people who have been murdered at the hands of police nationally. That doesn't happen in other countries as it relates to race. The rates of diabetes in communities of color is skyrocketing. There is underrepresentation of healthy foods in low income communities. You see asthma rates and high blood pressure rates in these communities that are astronomical. The deep internal stress that racism causes. These are issues that have been proven to be directly related to race and racism. And there is data to back up those assertions.

**Michael Joyce:** We've established this is an emergency. It's huge. It's over 400 years old in this country. It's millennia old (racism) globally. Here you are someone who is part of a city council that looks at policy, looks at procedures. The question becomes not only how you dismantle it, but where do you start?

**Andrea Jenkins:** You have to name what the problem is. And then one of the ways we've tried to address it in Minneapolis, is we have created what we call a Racial Equity Impact Analysis. And what that does is every decision, every dollar that we spend, we want to run those policies through the Racial Equity Impact Analysis, so we can learn who benefits from this policy, who is harmed by this policy, and if there is harm, what do we do to shift it to ensure it's equitable for all of our community.

**Michael Joyce:** I think people are really frustrated with how long this has been going on. How entrenched, how insurmountable, and how hopeless this feels. That they say: 'You can make all the declarations you want. You can name the problem. You can topple statues. You can raise awareness, but what can be done that is actionable? What do you say to people who are frustrated like that?

**Andrea Jenkins:** This structural, foundational aspect of American life did not happen overnight. And we're not going to be able to completely eradicate it overnight. It's going to take incremental change. I hate to sound like an 'incrementalist' but that is the process. And we all have to be engaged and take responsibility. Every organization, every institution, has to challenge itself. This work is not going to get resolved overnight. And it's not going to get resolved in a vacuum. We all have to play a role in ending systemic racism.

**Michael Joyce:** What did it feel like to you, summer 2020 in Minneapolis?

**Andrea Jenkins:** The summer of 2020 felt like a sledgehammer that literally knocked all of the wind out of the city of Minneapolis. It was absolutely compounded and complicated by the fact that we were in the midst of a global pandemic. And it felt like, potentially, a reckoning was on the horizon.

And what I hope this becomes is an opportunity to really begin to seriously address the inherent racism, to dismantle these systems, these institutions of oppression, and create equity and fairness. So that is one area to start.

*[closing music]*

**Michael Joyce:** In the summer of 2014 President Barack Obama visited Minneapolis. It was an occasion Andrea Jenkins felt deserved a poem. So she wrote one called, "Black Day." When I asked her if any poem kept coming to mind over the tumultuous summer of 2020, she kept coming back to "Black Day." Oh, and she said this:

**Andrea Jenkins:** "I want to end on a hopeful note. And I just want to clarify that the president of which I speak of in this poem is not our current president."

*[Andrea Jenkins reading poem] "Black Day ... Yesterday was a black day.  
Not as in dark matter; or consumer spending 'black Friday.'  
Though some may call City Hall a black hole,  
I wake up everyday and go to this black hole.  
I have to protect my soul.  
But this was not that day.  
This was a black day  
As in black people's issues were front and center.  
As in a time to make systemic change happen  
For those disabused by white supremacy.  
Black days don't occur very often in City Hall.  
Sometimes not at all.  
But as the President says  
'It is easy to be cynical, but hope is better'  
Stay hopeful  
~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~*

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