

The Reality of Sickle Cell Anemia

I grew up among the mythical journey of the slaves. Strong black men with large muscles and long legs; that could lift heavy rocks and run like the wind. I was sold by the pound like ground beef or a leg of lamb. I hid among my peers; dark faced souls, until I was singled out. My limbs were weak, the winter caused my bones to ache and brake like icicles. The slave master confined me to the kitchen or cast me away like a defective fold from his flock.

You see I made it across the middle passage by holding in my pain. A pain inherited by Kings, to protect them from the yellow fever that the African mosquito carries from the Nile to the shores of the mighty waters. The sun shield me from the cold, my blood changed to rage war against the demons of the dreaded bite that killed many; leaving them helpless as they shook and shivered into submission.

The gods of the enslaved said I lost my protection as I reached the shore of Jamestown. There my eyes turned fiery yellow, my limbs became thin; I cried in pain my stomach harden like the rock I stood on to be sold into labor along with my brothers and sisters.

The master beat me; accusing me of being lazy. I was unable to lift the load of an ox or stoop in his fields of cotton and tobacco. There by the grace of God and sheer determination I survived carrying the blood of my ancestors to generations after generations.

There are others like me, dark skin, long and thin limbs that bears the weight of the captive. Their eyes jaundice like the sun, they suffered through the cold nights as their arms and legs broke in many pieces; forcing their bodies to shake with fever until time cried out to the gods for mercy.

Crescent and Sickle Shaped

Among some African folk tales and ancient medical literature the word Ogbanjes is used to describe children stricken with this affliction; (the children who come and go). A term used by Africans because of the high infant mortality rate caused by this condition.

In 1904, a dental student from Grenada suffered with bouts of muscular tension, abdominal pain and feverish attacks that left him weak and scrawny. The student was able to complete his studies and returned to Grenada to practice dentistry where he later die from several bout of pneumonia in 1916.

During the years of bondage and enslavement some slave dropped death and laid unattended in agony; describe by their masters as a bad batch of goods. They were discarded before they infected others. One account of a runaway slave in the Southern Journal of Medical Pharmacology revealed after an autopsy the runaway had no spleen, a condition later seen in Sickle Anemia patients called splenomegaly caused by the death of abnormal red blood cells. Another observation tracked a Ghanaian family as far back as the 1670s with the same symptoms and condition. The origin of Sickle Anemia can be trace back to Africa, Asia and the Mediterranean regions.

African Americans during the period of Jim Crow; the period of invisible chains, spoke of the affliction as “spells” an unknown syndrome that caused illness and “fits” where the victims complained of joint pain, chills and shortness of breath.

The old folks easily recognizes these painful episodes, although a medical name was not attached to it; grandmother and nursemaids would applied homemade remedies; snuff mixed with turpentine, swamp roots and sweet oils to help relieve the pain.

The Face of Sickle Cell Anemia

In the early 1900's Physicians and Hematologists notice in some African Americans abnormal shaped red blood cells. The cells were elongated and fragile resembling a sickle or hook; not rounded and disc shaped outlining a normal red blood cell.

Most African Americans who suffered from this disease didn't know of the medical definition used to describe their ailment. Most suffered without getting proper treatment which resulted in premature death.

I'm one of those African Americans born with Sickle Cell Anemia. I'm sixty one years of age, many times throughout my life I was told to take it easy for I'm not suppose to live a productive life. But my life took many turns from street hustler, Black Panther, college student, Registered Nurse and Health Educator. The following is a insight into my personal journey with Sickle Cell Anemia.

"Boy, get yourself in this house," my Grandmother hollered. "There a cold wind from the north coming." Her and Mrs. Ragsdale, our neighbor could predict the weather long before any meteorologist.

A hot pot of beef stew, and cornbread prepared by Aunt Bea simmering on the stove. Grandmother Lucinda covered me with her handmade blanket, pouring a bowl of stew topped with a hefty slice of cornbread. I ate and laid on my bed for a much needed nap, after a day of walking the streets of Dallas.

A deep sleep filled with dreams of bearded men in armor, and a fair haired maiden in distress; locked in a dungeon, refusing the angry king's advances of marriage and promises of worldly riches. I struggled against wild boars, dragons, an evil wizard to rescue my love of many dreams. My mind fought against pain that mounted an assault from within. When I awoke my bed was drenched, not with sweat but with urine. My hands and feet swollen; my back and abdominal muscles became rigid, tender to the touch. Every bone in my arms and legs felt broken; it was hard to move. I cried out to my Grandmother, a cry that hasten her steps. My eyes were yellow, fiery like a forest burning out of control. It seemed as though melting lava was emitting from my bile, flowing colors of yellowish and reddish fluids made its way down my sheets.

For two days the pain raged on, as Grandmother Lucinda applied her portions of snuff mixed with menthol oils, and a sweet tasting tonic, called Swamp Roots to help decrease the pain and swelling.

She summoned her trusted friend Mrs Ragsdale for guidance, they decided to take me to the emergency room.

Dallas County's Parkland Hospital Emergency Department is one of the busiest emergency rooms in the nation. The doctor stood over me like God on high, "How long has he been in pain?" The balding man in his white jacket asked. "Two days," Grandmother Lucinda cried, "he's in a lot of pain, Doctor!"

"Yes I can see." He turned to the Nurse, and shouted out a list of demands. "Let get him started on O2 nasal mask with humidity at two liters, hydrate with D5w, slowly at one drop per minute. Give plenty of water, jucies, n.p.o per food; lets give Meperidine, stat: I.M., 25mg. The look on Grandmother Lucinda's face was that of fear, trying to hold her composure as hospital personnel flew by engrossed in their therapeutic world.

The Doctor beckon to a groups of young whites dressed in gray uniforms to stand near me as he lectured over me while I laid still in pain. "This is a classic case of Hemoglobin S disease in crisis." The five youth nodded their heads in recognition. "The prognosis is slim, but as long as he can avoid painful episodes his life expectancy is favorable." He uncovered my midsection and encouraged a tall feckled face Intern to peer at my abdomen. "Hard isn't it?" The Intern stepped back allowing the others to do the same. "And that's not the only area that get hard," as he smiled and glanced at the female Interns in the group, further raising the sheet for the group to observe my genitals. "That's called priapism; most commonly seen in young males with this disease."

Grandmother Lucinda with her hands on her hips interrupted the group, "Doctor, what does this mean?" Her stern look halting the exhibition.

"He has Sickle Cell Anemia." All the Interns nodding in agreement. "Where did he get it from." Grandmother Lucinda, asked. "He was born with the disease, a lot of people from African ancestry, have it."

Grandmother Lucinda's thoughts reflected back to Aunt Gertude's tales of the mighty African's eulogy and prophesy; 'he suffered for all his people, die but will return to free the enslaved and tortured.'

“Let get him to a room.” The Doctor commanded. At that moment, a blue eyed man with wooly hair pleaded, “Doctor hurry, we have two GSW’s (gun shot wounds) to the chest in trauma room ’B.” The Doctor turned and shouted, “Well, let’s get rolling, these damn Friday nights.” Glancing a few more seconds at me “And get some labs for the Sickler; arterial blood gas, C.B.C, S.G.O.T, sed-rate, basic metabolism, and do a type and cross-match for possible blood replacement.”

Sickle Cell Anemia Testing

In 1971, after the purge of the first Black Panther Chapter and the capture of “Geronimo” Pratt in Dallas, I along with Norris Bates formed a small cadre of Huey Newton supporters at El Centro College. The members, Odinga, Malik, Paula, Anice and Janice established survival programs in the community. Free clothing programs, food giveaways and Sickle Cell Anemia testing and counseling for the black residents. A Black Panther initiative to promote people owned programs.

Through a media campaign on campus, a free clothing program was launched. Black, White and Hispanic organizations pitched in by donating clothes; dropping off garments to a destinated location while the cadre picked them up and redistributed to people in need of clothing. Anice, Odinga, and I met with a prominent African American Doctor in Ft. Worth; Dr. Marion Brooks to talk about Sickle Cell testing. Through Dr. Brooks help and dedication to the black community, he helped establish the first community wide Sickle Cell Anemia testing in Dallas. The cadre would organizes community concerts on weekends with local musicians, dancers and poetry readers from High Schools and Colleges in the North Texas area. Over a thousand people; men, women and children were tested and followed up through Parkland Hospital’s Hematology Clinic.

I’m proud to acknowledge that the Black Panther Party was the first African American organization nationwide to educate African American about the cause of this disease and the need for communitywide testing and counseling.

Thanks to my family, friends and comrades, I’m able to lecture

students on the history of the Black Panther Party and the many social and health programs of the Party during our most productive years.

“Skip” Shockley.
All Power to the people!

:Skip Shockley is presently working on a manuscript about his family history, and the struggle of African Americans in North Texas from the early 1900’s all the way up to his involvement in the Black Panther Party.

