

Hello, my name is Evelyn McKnight and I am a survivor of the Nebraska Hepatitis C Outbreak – the largest single source Hepatitis C outbreak in US history. With 98 others, I was infected with Hepatitis C, like you, through the reuse of syringes to access a multi-dose vial. This happened in 2000, while I was undergoing chemotherapy for stage III breast cancer. I beat the breast cancer, but was left with chronic Hepatitis C. The malpractice litigation took about 4 years, and when it ended I used my settlement award to begin a nonprofit patient advocacy foundation – HONORreform. HONOR stands for Hepatitis Outbreaks’ National Organization for Reform.

Through the organization many people have shared with me their reflections about healthcare acquired Hepatitis C. I want to share with you some of this collective wisdom.

There are many players in the Nevada outbreak. I’d like to offer suggestions and encouragement to all of the involved parties.

First and foremost, **the patients** who were put at risk for contracting a blood-borne pathogen:

I know you have a lot of unrest in your life. You have the right to feel betrayed, angry, and fearful. You may feel overwhelmed by all the new and alarming information and decisions that you must make. But you must believe this: you have within you the resiliency to move through this painful and devastating experience. You have the strength to spring back, to be persistent in the face of defeat.

As I see it, you have 3 immediate tasks that you must face: grieving, finding legal counsel, and finding healthcare providers you can trust. Rest assured, you do not have to complete these tasks TODAY. You can work through these tasks thoughtfully and circumspectly and in the process, find some comfort. When you feel overwhelmed by these tasks, take some deep breaths and tell yourself that you will make decisions that work well for you. As you thoughtfully make your decisions one by one, the anxiety, anger and grief will have less power over you. You may not notice it today or tomorrow but it WILL happen.

In terms of grieving, you have two types of grief to deal with: the grief of loosing confidence in the healthcare delivery system and the grief of potentially jeopardized health. Understand that you have lost two things very dear to you and so you will grieve them – you will experience the emotions of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and ultimately acceptance. Seek the support of others – support groups, loved ones, counselors, pastors, web-based support groups. Know that you are not alone – there are many throughout the world who love you, care for you and pray for you. In addition, there are ways you can work through your grief yourself – prayer, meditation, journaling, reflection. For myself personally, I found great healing in writing a book about my experience and in advocating for patient safety. I hope someday you will join our patient advocacy foundation Hepatitis Outbreaks’ National Organization for Reform. By sharing your story, you will find some solace in knowing that you are using your suffering to improve safety in healthcare settings for many others.

It may be difficult for you to put your confidence in the medical community again. Take your time finding healthcare providers who provide quality healthcare and are responsive to your needs. Ask a lot of questions. After you tell your story, a sensitive healthcare provider will be quite willing to answer your questions and assure you that they have your best interest at heart. There are many fine healthcare providers in

Las Vegas. Don't let the unconscionable actions of a misguided few prevent you from seeking the healthcare that you need. Once you find caring and skilful healthcare providers, you will be able to trust the medical profession again.

At the start of my litigation process, I knew nothing about finding a malpractice lawyer or filing a lawsuit. I did some soul-searching about how I wanted litigation to proceed and what I wanted to accomplish through the lawsuit and I recommend you do the same. Do you want it over as quickly as possible or are you willing to accept a longer time frame in an effort to earn a more favorable outcome? Do you want to be actively involved in every decision or do you want your lawyer to take care of all the details and not bother you? Do you want your legal counsel to fight aggressively for your rights or do you want legal counsel to work co-operatively with the defendants through mediation? It is important that you know what you are looking for in your legal counsel so that when you interview lawyers, you will find one who matches your values. Find someone who can earn your trust over time, but does not expect it to be given before it is earned.

A tragedy of this magnitude affects everyone in the community. I want to offer some encouragement and advice in particular to several groups within the community.

To the **public health department workers**, I want to offer thanks for your compassionate response to patients. Please continue to provide empathetic support and information to the community. These services are important and will be needed for a long time.

There are several groups of professionals who will be serving the patients for a long time. To the **lawyers, counselors and spiritual advisors**, I encourage you to provide considerate support of the highest integrity, always keeping the best interest of your client in mind. Again, it is a long road you are embarking on. I personally witnessed burn-out in these types of professionals in the Nebraska experience, so I admonish you to also take good care of yourself so that you can take good care of your clients.

Healthcare workers – to the great majority of you who are providing quality care - hold your head up. The actions of an unscrupulous few do not reflect upon your practice. Your concerned care for your patients will speak to your commitment to excellence.

I want to offer some suggestions to the larger community and in particular to **public spokesmen** – those people who are quoted in the media. You set the tone for healing in the community. The mayor of Minneapolis reacted to their recent bridge collapse by asking the community to show “sustained compassion” to the disaster victims. I call on the greater Las Vegas community to show “sustained compassion” to your disaster victims in the months and years to come.

Acceptance comes when we can acknowledge that some bit of good can come from suffering. I foresee that because of the large scale suffering of the Las Vegas outbreak, there will be sweeping reform throughout the country for patient safety. In addition, I think that the epidemic of Hepatitis C will finally receive the attention and funding it deserves in this country. For each of you individually, I believe with certainty that you will come through this experience with new wisdom and grace. I hope that you each will find solace in the good that will come about because of the Las Vegas outbreak.