Awareness is the “knowledge or perception of a situation or fact...the state of being conscious of something”.

On Thursday, March 12, 2020, around the globe, we need to put some extra effort and energy into bringing awareness to renal health and chronic kidney disease (CKD). World Kidney Day 2020 has a theme we can all stand behind: “Kidney Health for Everyone Everywhere – from Prevention to Detection and Equitable Access to Care.”

The statistics around chronic kidney disease are staggering, to say the least. According to the World Kidney Day (WKD) website, 10% of the people worldwide are affected by CKD. According to a study by Couser WG, 2 million people worldwide receive treatment that includes dialysis or a kidney transplant to stay alive. Of these, patients suffering from CKD, the majority are treated in only five countries – the United States, Japan, Germany, Brazil and Italy-- countries that only represent 12% of the world’s population. The cost of CKD is just as staggering. Health budgets are heavily impacted by kidney care and unfortunately in countries with low-to-middle incomes, most people cannot afford much-needed treatment. Couser further states that approximately one million people die annually from untreated kidney disease, highlighting the need for expanded quality care across the world.

How do we impact this? GET INVOLVED! I truly believe something can be done everywhere, no matter the size or sophistication of your organization, to elevate awareness. It all starts with education. Ben Franklin wrote that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Although he was referring to fire safety, the quote has universal meaning. Renal health education needs to happen long before someone sees a Nephrologist.

Education begins with prevention and how we keep our kidneys healthy. Then we educate on maintaining kidney health with underlying conditions, i.e. diabetes and/or hypertension. Finally, we provide education on treatment for those who may have progressed to kidney failure. Transplant
education happens within all of these levels—whether learning how to be a donor or get on a transplant list. Education is not a one and done deal. It needs to be ongoing and encompass a broader picture. People who come to our clinics with a high level of education about their CKD make choices that lead to better outcomes. They make better diet choices, better vascular access choices and are typically very involved in their care.

My organization, Greenfield Health Systems, gets involved in various ways. We have lobby days on World Kidney Day in our hospitals and clinics. We set up tables, we take blood pressures, we share educational materials and most importantly, we talk with people. We make ourselves available to answer questions and raise awareness. We’ve even partnered with our local National Kidney Fund offices to host awareness days in our dialysis clinics focusing on the families of patients receiving treatment. It’s often the case that families have similar behaviors and/or genetic factors that lead to CKD that they’re unaware of. Partnering with kidney organizations can be so helpful with providing or adding resources you may not have. Make sure you reach out to your local partners—you’ll likely find they are more than happy to help you further this important cause.

Another key way we make an impact is through community outreach. We talk with local religious organizations and attend health fairs to spread awareness. People don’t know what they don’t know—so reaching diverse audiences can be a critical part of spreading important information.

We also get involved with our government. We keep our eye on legislation that impacts kidney care and make our leaders aware of the true impact that legislation could have on their constituents. We are a vocal presence on Capitol Hill, raising our collective voices ensuring quality and access to renal healthcare for all. The National Renal Administrators Association (NRAA), for instance, has an annual “Day on the Hill” where together with patients, we meet with legislators to talk about renal community issues. I am so grateful to NRAA for teaching me how to be effective in advocacy. Every year, the patients that attend with me ask how we know the legislators support our cause. I tell them sometimes we know, sometimes we do not know, but one thing is clear: We were there with a unified voice, and that voice was heard.

I challenge all of you to do one thing on March 12. Do something to increase awareness about kidney health, sponsor a health fair, or even start your own renal health blog. Have a lobby day or write a letter to your local member of Congress. It can be as simple as wearing a healthy kidney button or meeting with folks after church. Do something big, do something small, truly anything is something and can make a difference.

Wishing you health and prosperity today and always,

William Poirier, MBA, RN, Regional Administrator
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