

What a Swastika Tattoo Taught Me About Social Determinants of Health

I reached over his body to auscultate his heart. My stethoscope hovered over his various tattoos before landing on his left upper chest. Below, a large swastika tattoo with jagged lines.

I quickly finished my cardiac exam and covered his chest with his hospital gown, completed the rest of my physical exam and proceeded to preround on all of my other patients.

I wondered if he'd seen my black yarmulke camouflaged on top of my black hair.

What a way to start my first day of residency.

John had cellulitis. His severe skin infection was likely caused by his intravenous heroin use, and he needed to stay in the hospital for intravenous antibiotics. John called me "Dr. B" and then just "B." I kind of liked that, as my impostor syndrome didn't permit me my full title as a new intern. I could hide behind my mask and now informal title as I learned to become a real doctor.

Each day, though, I couldn't stop thinking about his tattoo.

On the day he was getting discharged, I decided to ask him some personal questions so I could better understand my patients in the future.

"If you don't mind me asking, do you feel comfortable sharing how you starting using heroin?"

"Of course, B."

John started by explaining that he had a normal childhood, playing football growing up, doing alright in school. But when he was 16, his mother started using prescribed oxycodone for pain. As her addiction developed, her prescription was insufficient. In those days, she was able to go to a second physician to get more oxycodone pills without the knowledge of the first.

As her addiction worsened, she got creative to satisfy her cravings. She brought John to *his* doctor, and told him to say he had back pain from football. They made a deal: he could keep half the oxycodone and she would keep the other half. He didn't have any pain, but he was a teenager at the time so he starting using the oxycodone. That led him to a downward spiral himself, bringing him eventually to heroin. From heroin, John got into the wrong circles. He got arrested a few times, leading to multiple incarcerations.

"B, in jail," John explained to me, "it's all about protection. You need someone to have your back." And the biggest group at his jail, he said, was the white guys. That's how he got his tattoos. One near his belly button read "14/88," each two-digit number being white supremacy numeric symbols. And the swastika? Same thing. He needed his protection. I didn't fully understand how tattoo machinery was allowed in jail, but John explained that a jailmate Macgyvered a pencil to a wire in the dark of the night. That was why his swastika tattoo was so jagged. John wished he could get it removed and assured me that he didn't have any hatred in his heart, despite the tattoo that covered it.

John finished by telling me about his younger brother. How he was so proud of him, now a drummer for a successful band that travels the country. How he made it.

The contrast between John and his brother showed me how much the direction of John's life was determined by one large event. John's offense was being old enough to enable his mother's addiction. John lived on the streets with a heroin addiction, kidney failure and other medical conditions. His brother lived on tour buses with a fanbase and a Spotify following.

His younger brother escaped free. Because John took the hit.
