

Special Episode 4 Coronavirus:
Re-deployment in the Age of Coronavirus
Dr. Maria Morban May 9, 2020

Welcome to MennoHealth Cast, a joint production of Mennonite Healthcare Fellowship, in partnership with The Mennonite, Inc. Today we have another special episode related to the novel coronavirus, known as COVID-19. I am your host, Joann Hunsberger, and I am speaking with Dr. Maria Morban. Dr. Morban is a medical doctor from Universidad Autonoma is Santo Domingo. She has been living in New York City for over a decade, where she holds several volunteer positions and works as a clinical research coordinator. You may have seen her smiling face on the front of Mennonite World Review from April 15, 2020. Dr. Morban is a member of Manhattan Mennonite Fellowship.

Thank you for having me on your podcast today. My name is Maria Morban and I live in NYC, to be more specific, the Bronx. I was born in the beautiful country Dominican Republic and came to NY after completing my medical studies. I studied to be a medical doctor but when I came to NY 13 years ago I became a clinical coordinator with research. I love my work as clinical research coordinator at the amazing Internal Medicine/ Nephrology department at Columbia University. And even more I love my work as a volunteer. It has been a tough couple of months here in New York City and I am happy to give voice to what is happening.

Maria, you are a volunteer as an advocate for victims of rape and domestic violence. Can you tell me about what you do in this volunteer position?

I volunteer to advocate for victims of rape crisis and domestic violence. I provide crisis counseling, emotional support. I help to advocate for survivors of sexual and intimate partner violence who seek treatment in the emergency departments. The Crime Victims Treatment Center is already 42 years ago when it started.

How long have you been volunteering as an advocate for these victims of sexual and intimate partner violence?

I have been volunteering for 12 years, when have to be on call for a minimum of like 2 times for per month and I plan to volunteer as long as I can.

We talked prior to the podcast and I really admire your passion for taking care of these victims of sexual violence.

Can you tell me about the people you are advocating for? Are you advocating for their safety? Their health? Their civic rights? Tell me more.

When a victim of domestic violence or rape comes to the emergency department, they need someone to inform them, "I'm here for you" and everything happening around them at that moment and that grey time of their life, they get the

support. It is not their fault, and be company and listen to them and let them know that the Crime Victim Treatment Center is there for them.

I let them know that there is a lot of support to help them in many ways. There is legal, psychological, holistic support, and it is all free of any charge. I help them get support through the Crime Victim Treatment Center.

So you are there to listen to them, to offer them emotional support and really to help them to find the legal and psychological support that they need to get through this terrible crisis.

Like the bridge for this moment for this institution.

So you are the bridge between the victims and the institution where you work so that the victim can get the help that they need.

Yes.

It is amazing work that you do.

There is much concern that social isolation due to coronavirus may actually lead to increased domestic violence. Have you seen this in your role as a volunteer?

No, not in my case or in the three hospitals where I volunteer, but to be honest, domestic violence is a silent enemy. This is always like a silent pandemic.

So, regardless of the whether the coronavirus pandemic is going on, domestic violence continues and is unrelenting.

Yes.

Maria, I understand that you work as a clinical research coordinator, which is essentially the main person who recruits patients for clinical studies, and you help keep track of the patients and how they are doing. Can you tell me what kind of studies you are working on?

I am a research coordinator working on studies related to the genetics of chronic kidney diseases. Our goal is to identify genetic factors predisposing individuals to chronic kidney diseases. I also work on the All of Us Research Program, which seeks to extend precision medicine for all diseases by building a national research cohort of one million or more participants in the United States.

So, it sounds to me that what you are doing is to identify patients that are genetically disposed to kidney disease so that you can stop it before they get really sick with their kidney disease.

Kind of, yes

Can you tell me what you mean by “precision medicine”?

Precision Medicine is "an emerging approach for disease treatment and prevention that takes into account individual variability in genes, environment, and lifestyle for each person." This approach will allow doctors and researchers to predict more accurately, which treatment and prevention strategies for a particular disease will work in a group of people. The medicine has to be more precise, more individualized, based on our genetic material, lifestyle. That is what precision medicine is.

So, we are taking this one size fits all approach and getting rid of that and instead we are going to customize our medicine to each individual so that we can target their genetics, their lifestyle so that we can help them live good lives, healthy lives.

Yes.

It is the new approach to medicine.

Maria, you trained as a physician in the Dominican Republic, and then here in the states you work as a clinical research coordinator and volunteer as a victim advocate. However, during coronavirus, your department asked you if you were willing to redeploy and work outside your normal work. How did you redeploy? How did you volunteer? What did you do?

I work in the Nephrology department at Columbia University and when they asked me, people to volunteer during the crisis, I was already in the dialysis care unit, helping technicians to program dialysis machines. As you know, a major issue for extremely ill patients with the coronavirus is that they experience severe kidney dysfunction and many need to be put on a dialysis machine to replace the function of their kidneys. So, I volunteered for redeployment as a dialysis technician. I would take the dialysis units to the sick COVID patients even when they were in the intensive care units.

That is awesome. So you were already working on the dialysis machines, so when they asked you to redeploy, you redeployed as a dialysis technician. And that is the person who takes the dialysis to the patient to replace their kidney function, because, as you said coronavirus patients often have really bad kidney function.

Yes, but to be more specific, it was as an assistant to the nurses and technicians because they were really struggled. They had over hours, because they had over hours even without this pandemic. I was helping them a little bit more.

So, even before the pandemic they were working extra. You were extra help for those nurses and technicians.

What did it mean to you to be a front-line provider? Why did you volunteer for this redeployment?

It is a sublime and beautiful thing to help others. And during this time, I was able to be with patients who were completely isolated from the love and care of their relatives. Due to the pandemic, the hospital does not let adult patients have visitors. It meant a lot to me to be able to be present with these patients, providing them support for their kidneys, but to also provide support for them emotionally when they were sick, lonely and isolated.

For example, one of the elderly was in the dialysis unit. I knew he was alone, just with the nurse and the doctor. They try always to help them. And, I started to give him water. But the nurse told me I can give him water. He can take a glass of water. I start to do the water, but I asked him if he liked to do like the water soup, helping him with the spoon. He was happy, even though he could do it himself, he said yes. That was a good experience.

It sounds like just being by the patient, and offering him assistance, even though he could have done it, but being able to be by his side when his loved ones couldn't be there, that was really meaningful to you.

Yes. Like healing you soul. You are doing something that a human being is created to do. It is a good thing.

You felt healed in your own by doing something that you felt that human beings should be doing, is taking care of others.

Yes.

I like how you said that it is a “Sublime and beautiful thing to help others”. That is a wonderful statement.

Thank you.

New York has been devastated by the coronavirus, with thousands and thousands of people dying from the virus, and the bustling city has virtually come to a standstill by this crisis. Can you tell me what your experience in living in NYC has been like when living through this.

Living in NYC during the coronavirus pandemic has been... sad and stressful. New York City is not the same city. It is sleeping for the first time in the history of NYC.

Yeah, to take this most amazing, bustling, crazy city and it is just like it has been silenced.

Yeah.

Can you tell me any personal stories, from friends or community members who have been affected by the coronavirus?

Certainly, I have encountered many people in the hospital with coronavirus.

One person who was working with me in the clinic had mild symptoms, in the beginning of the pandemic, in March. But he came back to work after he had tested and quarantine and mild symptoms when the hospital let him come back to work. After quarantine, he returned to work and he admitted that he was not seriously sick. He told me, Maria, everyone has coronavirus.

So this coworker of yours said that everyone is probably infected by coronavirus because your coworker was not seriously ill, so his thought is that other people probably have it too, because you get it and you don't' even get that sick from it.

Exactly.

Maria, can you tell me how you came to be part of Manhattan Mennonite Fellowship?

Well, I was at Camp Deer Park and there I met a group of Christians about 4 years ago. My friend saw that I was very tired even though I had just returned from a vacation, and she recommended Deer Park to me so that I could take a break from my stressors.

I was in a vicious circle full of anxiety and inexplicable sadness, I was looking for happiness in the wrong things and I was drowning in work. My friend, a Christian Mennonite woman, a psychologist, recommended a weekend of rest at Deer

Park. She gave a spectacular description of that place to me. The cabin fires, the smell of wood, the food, the wonderful autumn days that I could spend there. I needed that place. When I heard it was a church camp, I panicked, afraid that the Christians there would preach to me. But when I was there, like a miracle, this began my story as a Mennonite Christian. I believed in God. And I followed those who invited me, because their fruit, not their word. And when God calls you there is a great force within that place of the heart that is not the physical heart, but where the soul is placed, where the soul is placed. It is placed there by your Creator and is never seen in the anatomy and physiology books. Those books do not describe it never, but it still exists.

And so, I have been part of Manhattan Mennonite fellowship and now as a Deacon as of 4 years ago.

Dr. Morban, it has been wonderful to get to know you through speaking with you today. I pray health and healing to your community in New York City, and I thank you for the incredible work of volunteering to be on the frontlines during this pandemic.

Thank you for joining the MennoHealth Cast as I spoke with Dr. Maria Morban from New York City as she told us about her volunteer work advocating for victims of abuse and her redeployment in the time of COVID-19.

If you are interested in donating or getting involved with the MHF, please go to our website at mennohealth.org and click on the link in the top right corner or email us at info@mennohealth.org. During these tough times, we need you to financially support the mission of Mennonite Healthcare Fellowship to help continue this dialogue about the intersection of faith and health. If you are interested in telling your coronavirus story, please email me at info@mennohealth.org.

Musical credits go to Paul Schlitz. Editing and production credits to Eugene Stevanus. And, I'm your host, Joann Hunsberger. Please join us again next time!