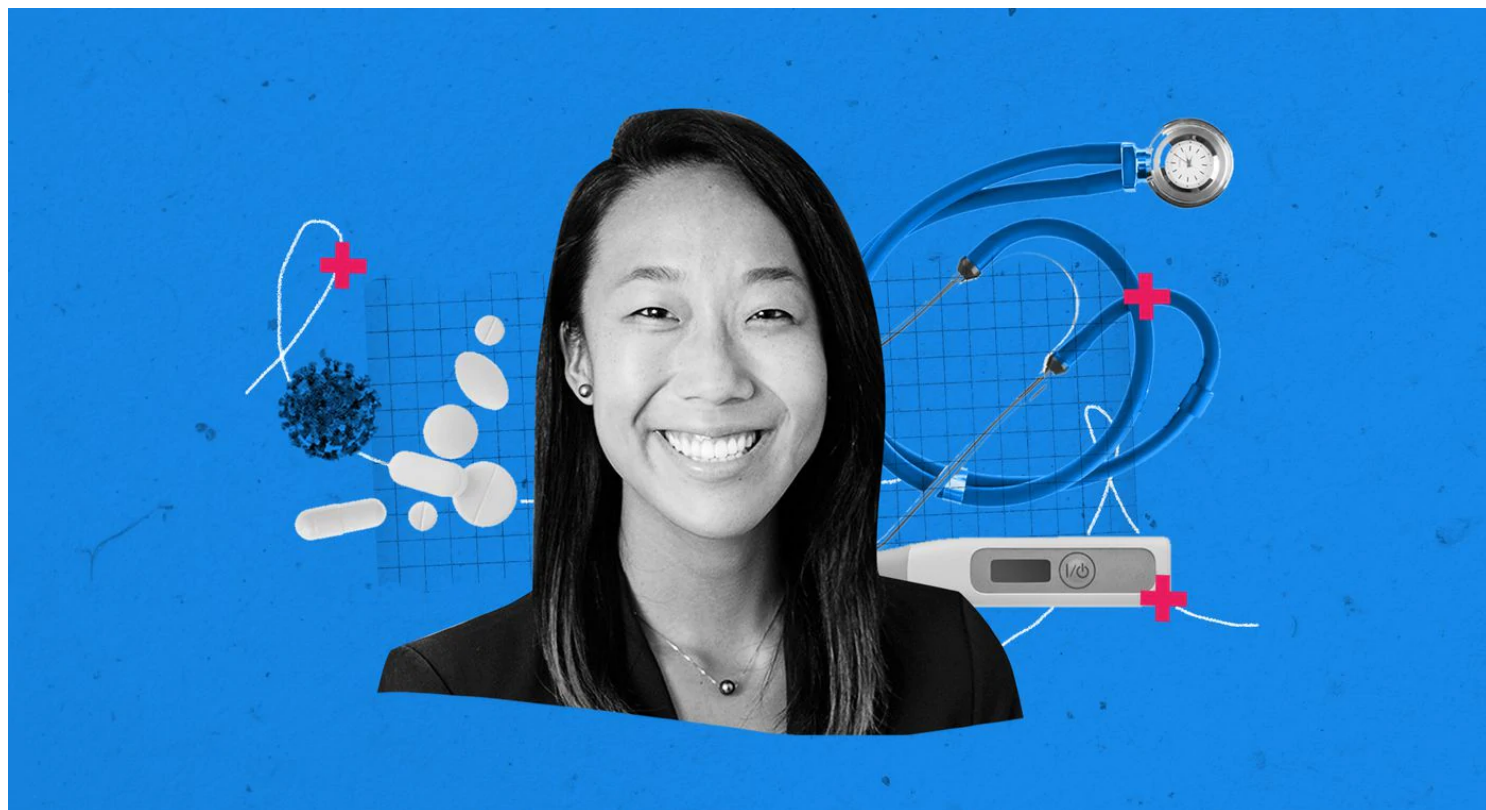


HEALTH // PERSPECTIVE ▾

I'm an Asian American doctor on the front lines of two wars: Coronavirus and racism

'I'm not racist, I just don't want to get the virus,' one patient told me



(Courtesy of Sojung Yi; iStock; Lily illustration)

Sojung Yi ● April 21

“Where are you from?”



Those are the first words out of my patient's mouth when I ask how I can help her today. A lifetime of being asked this question as an Asian American has prepared me to simply reply, "I'm from here."

Usually that dissipates the conversation, but today, my patient adds, "I'm not racist, I just don't want to get the virus."

I am an Asian American physician working in the emergency room at the University of California in San Francisco, and my experience is not isolated. As headlines continue to provide updates about [the covid-19 virus](#) overwhelming [hospitals across the country](#), an overt wave of xenophobic and racist sentiment has also swept in.

Early on, even before the coronavirus was officially labeled a pandemic, Asian commuters shared traumatic stories of harrowing public transits marked by [racial slurs](#), [spitting](#), and [physical assaults](#) from passersby. And on Sunday, a man wearing medical scrubs and an N95 mask blocking an anti-lockdown protest in Denver was told to "Go back to China".

Video shows standoff at Denver protest against stay-at-home order



People wearing scrubs stood in front of vehicles filled with protesters campaigning against Colorado's stay-at-home order on April 19. (Marc Zenn via Storyful)

Despite being on the front lines of this pandemic, Asian American health care workers are also subjected to this racism. Some patients have even asked my Asian nurses if someone “not from China” could take care of them.

A month ago, after President Trump defended his use of the term “Chinese Virus,” I began to worry about the safety of my patients.

I treated an elderly Chinese man who had been walking in the park with a mask on when he was spit on, pushed over and kicked. He was called “dirty,” and told to “Go back to China.” His arthritic hands were scraped and studded with gravel, and the bruise on his head seemed to be blushing into a deeper purple while I reached for the stool next to his bed. As he recounted the incident with a stoic calmness, the young Cantonese video interpreter paused before her eyes teared and voice cracked, apologizing for seeming unprofessional.

I felt her pain, I felt our collective pain. While I am not Chinese American and recognize the hazard of [grouping Asians](#), my identity as an Asian American from an immigrant family is as much defined by me, as it is perceived and imposed by others, including my own patients.

When Trump uses the term “Chinese Virus,” the message to the



public health response in the United States, and to allow xenophobia and racism to fuel public panic and fear.

From my patient's room, it does not seem so foolish to be aware of how words can turn into scars inflicted on another human. History has shown how dehumanizing people through analogies to [rats](#) or [roaches](#) can lead to both insidiously erosive racism and mass violence. In the aftermath of Ebola in 2014, [anti-black](#) sentiments comparing West Africans to animals increased, and black people with no affiliation with West Africa experienced racism from the [larger public](#). While geography is important for epidemiologic study, these labels reduce a heterogeneous population with diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds into one broad category that widens existing stigma.

[[The coronavirus is spreading. So is discrimination.](#)]

Last week, ads [for Trump](#) and [Republican senators](#) in difficult races blamed China as the common enemy who spread the virus. Imagery of Asian people filled the screen, reinforcing the label of “Chinese virus” and [giving a face to blame](#) for high unemployment in the United States amid a still rising death toll. Prior public health emergencies reveal how [stigmatization](#) of groups can be a common strategy for collective coping. However, it is precisely in these moments of crisis that we cannot let racism arouse fear and divert our attention from the true work at hand: taking care of each other.

~~This racism and racialization of disease is not new in the United~~



from this pandemic, as we imagine what “new normal” we wish to build and fight for, I hope we will consider the power of our words and discourse.

Only together, we can flatten the curve, and only together, we can prevent another curve of hate crime from rising. The covid-19 virus has revealed how interconnected our world is. Not just in the physical movement of patients spreading the virus, or the disrupted supply chains of protective equipment and ventilators, but also in the reverberations of our conversations, how everyday words from leaders can translate into real violence against innocent people.

Instead of pointing fingers, amplifying fear and fracturing communities, could we care for each other and combat this racism in solidarity?

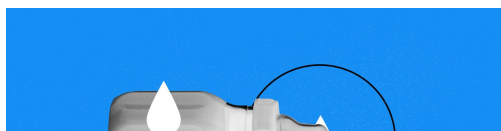
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Between three kids, I

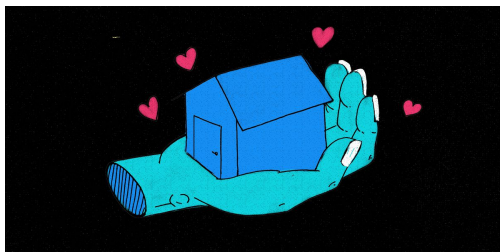


months. I wouldn't

necessarily do it
again.

Plus, stories from four other
women

Brianna Bell ● April 28



LIFESTYLE // **PERSPECTIVE**

My apartment is old,
creaky and
crumbling. I hated

it, until the
pandemic hit.

It's as if my brain turned a
corner

Jenna Jonaitis ● April 22



REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

One day abortion is
legal, the next day
it's not: Coronavirus

sparks a ping-pong
fight in Texas

The 'minute-to-minute, hour-
to-hour' change is unheard
of



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