

Q & A

with Leana S. Wen, MD, MSc

In October 2014, The Washington Post ran an article by Dr. Leana Wen about an experience she had in the emergency room treating a patient who stutters who arrived seeking emergency medical treatment for chest pains. She touched on her own experience with stuttering in her article. We contacted Dr. Wen for an interview after the article ran, when she held the position of Director, Patient-Centered Care Research and Assistant Professor, Departments of Emergency Medicine & Health Policy at The George Washington University. Earlier this year, Dr. Wen became the Baltimore City Health Commissioner.

Q: Where are you from, where do you live now?

I was born in China, grew up in Los Angeles, and am living and working now in Washington, DC.

Q: What's your passion?

As a healthcare professional, I'm passionate about bridging the gap between what patients need and what the healthcare system provides. I consider myself a patient and public health advocate.

Q: Do you remember when you first began to stutter?

It was in grade school. I didn't tell people I stuttered. I was good at hiding it. I felt it was shameful.

Q: Did you seek treatment? Did it help?

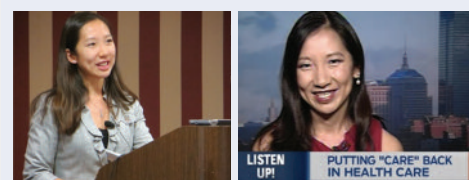
I never received any treatment. My parents knew. I taught myself to just slow down, don't be so nervous. That was the key for me.

Q: Tell us about your experience with stuttering as a child.

I always hid my stuttering, but sometimes I couldn't hide it. I remember a school presentation on the Roman Empire. I had trouble with the letter "R". I remember jabbing a pencil in my leg.

Q: Has your stuttering gotten worse or better since you were younger? How?

After becoming less covert and learning to talk about it, my fluency increases. I needed to learn not to be so fearful. My stuttering became less and less. I needed to become less



fearful. Today I'm not 100% fluent or comfortable with my stutter, but it is not the impediment I thought it was. This realization made a huge difference for me.

Q: How did it affect you growing up?

Because I worked so hard to hide my stutter, even from those I care about, it made me disconnected from many people. I've only recently come to terms with it. I realized that speech is so integral to our lives and our relationships; it wasn't worth hiding my true self from my friends and the people I love.

Q: How does stuttering affect you as a doctor?

I believe it makes me a much more empathetic doctor. Many patients have struggles. Some have medical issues, some have disabilities, and some have trouble communicating. I understand that these struggles can be a source of shame, and we share that common bond and perspective.

Q: What are the biggest challenges stuttering has presented to you?

Every time I have a job interview or big challenge, I think about the impact of my stutter. Will I stutter? Will I lose the job? Sometimes I've shared my stuttering with a prospective employer and sometimes I've chosen not to mention it. Showing it is a recent thing for me to do, and I'm now comfortable with that decision.

Q: What is your greatest accomplishment with regard to stuttering?

Coming out and talking about it was difficult for me, so my greatest accomplishment was becoming open about my stuttering and speaking up to other doctors, med students or others who stutter.

Q: Was there much discussion of stuttering in your med school classes?

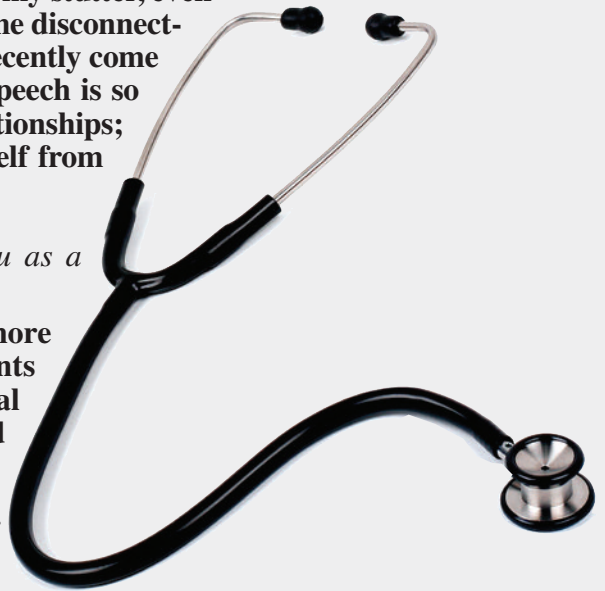
There was no discussion in med school.

Q: Based upon your experiences, what would you like to tell children who stutter?

Seek treatment. The earlier you seek treatment, the better. Avoidance reduction therapy is critical. And be open about it.

Q: Based upon your experiences, what would you tell parents of children who stutter?

Be understanding, accepting, and ask for help early.



Learn more about Dr. Wen at DrLeanaWen.com

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