

Sam Cheshier MD PhD was a member of the Institute of Stem Cell Biology and Regenerative Medicine and faculty in the Department of Neurosurgery until he was recruited to the University of Utah Medical School as Director of the Pediatric Surgical Neuro-Oncology. Sam was an outstanding scientist in training while an MSTP student at Stanford, working [with me] to understand much about the cell cycle status and mobilization of hematopoietic stem cells. He was also a principle in the early days of broadening the functions and mechanisms of the 'don't eat me' cell surface protein CD47 works in primary human brain cancers, and is the leader of the clinical trials of blocking antibodies to CD47 in patients with relapsed glioblastomas and medulloblastomas. He played important roles also in helping identify, recruit, and train graduate students to the institute. Although we have been close friends and colleagues for over 25 years, he never complained of racist behavior against him, until the events surrounding the murder of George Floyd prompted me to ask him to relate his thoughts on the issue. Here is his letter to me and all of you.

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On George Floyd: Thoughts from a Black Stanford Lifer

The Hurt: The events of the past two weeks have sadly reinforced my perception of our country. Although I did not want to believe it was true, I believe that deep down, we live in a racist country. We are a nation where a majority of its white citizens are perfectly comfortable remaining uninvolved, allowing the worst things to happen to its citizens of color. As long as the atrocities are not witnessed, occur far away, and do not directly affect the white majority, the oppressions/discriminations/killings are allowed to go unchecked. On May 25, 2020, a black man was dragged out of his car, restrained, and then killed by a white police officer while three fellow officers casually watched, essentially guarding the murderer. These men knew they were being recorded, but that fact did nothing to dissuade their actions and inactions. Every person of color knew what would happen next. The police would claim resistance or bring up the familiar narratives white Americans hold for black men. He was threatening them. They were afraid for their lives. He has a criminal record.

The sad reality is that the system would have bought their defenses if not for the security camera footage (unknown to the policeman), showing them dragging an unarmed, unresisting black man from his car. They may have to stand trial, but they would have the best lawyers to defend them. Swaths of politicians would be on their side. An entire information ecosystem would work to support their telling of the event while simultaneously denigrating the life of the victim: "This black man got what was coming to him." "He deserved punishment." "He's one less criminal we have to protect you from." Is spending a fake \$20 bill, using drugs, or having an imperfect past ground for capital punishment? It is if you are a black man in the United States of America. Time and time again, we have all seen that the police need far less justification for killing or brutalizing a black man or woman in the United States of America.

The killing of George Floyd has touched a nerve in this country and the world. It has been encouraging to see people of all races, colors, and walks of life participating in massive peaceful

protests against police brutality, racism, and the structural inequalities baked into the very fabric of our nation. The video, heavy-handed police tactics, and the subsequent actions of our national and local leaders have all served as proof, leaving no doubt about the existence of institutionalized racism in our nation.

Many of us have watched the video of a black man begging for his life, calling out to his dead mother, and then slumping, surrendering to death. As we watched, we all knew we were one of seven people—five in the video, and two not. Black people knew we were either Mr. Floyd or the person taking the video. Either someone has his knee on our neck, or we are witnessing the atrocity, powerless to do anything about it. White people may have realized they were one of the police. Either the cop with the knee on the neck or one of the three police who just let it happen. There is one other white person who I wish was in the video; the cop who would have pushed the knee off Mr. Floyd's neck. The cop who would not stand to let a person die unjustly under their watch.

White people, you need to ask yourself who you are. If you do nothing, you stand on the same side of the cop who has his knee on someone's neck. If you are the cop that would have pushed the knee off Mr. Floyd's neck, we thank you for your willingness to ally yourself with the cause by doing something. These white people are the same who marched hand in hand with Dr. King in Selma, gave their lives in Mississippi so that black people could have the right to vote, refused to move away when a black family moved into the neighborhood, rented apartments to single black mothers with teenage sons, and approved mortgages for black families with a good income but a marginal credit score. We know who you are, and we appreciate your works. However, what is hard to hear and harder to acknowledge, is that many white individuals are the cops standing there, backs turned as a knee is on someone's neck. You are probably not a racist, but you are definitely **not** anti-racist. You will spend \$40,000 a year to send your child to private school but vote against a small tax increase meant to benefit schools in the poorer, darker areas of your community. You will post on social media how horrible the Floyd incident was, but can't take the time to march in protest, go hand out masks or bottles of water. You will decry the violence of the protests, but not denounce the violence that led to the protests. You place Black Lives Matter signs in your front yard and call it a day. You know who you are, and we are asking you to turn around, look at the knee on a human being's neck, and please push it off. There are three of you and only one of him. You can help.

The Hope: In 1993, I came to Stanford with a suitcase of clothes and another full of books. Those suitcases contained all of my possessions. I spent the next 25 years there as an M.D./Ph.D. student, a neurosurgery resident, and faculty. At every level, I encountered genuine discrimination. I had my fellow medical students tell me to my face that I only got in because of my race. I had the Stanford Sheriff run me down on my bike while riding home from the lab. Identifying themselves as police by turning the police lights on **after** I was already face down in the dirt. They quickly went back in their vehicle and rode off after I reached in my wallet and pulled out my Stanford ID card. I am lucky they didn't think it was a gun. I have had parents request the services of a different neurosurgeon for no apparent reason. I have had nurses ask me to take out the food tray of a patient I removed brainstem tumor from a week earlier. I had a faculty colleague tell me that I didn't deserve to be a PI of a lab at Stanford. He didn't know I was instrumental in recruiting him to Stanford years earlier. However, none of those negative experiences came close to the positive experiences I have had with the students, faculty, and staff

at Stanford. I can't tell you how many times a person at Stanford gave me a chance and took a chance on me. I can't tell you how many times at Stanford I heard, "well, all things being equal, we are going to take the women and persons of color." I can't tell you how many times Stanford offered me opportunities to help others just like me.

Stanford is not a perfect place. Like the rest of our society, most there are content to turn their backs away. There are even a few people who want their knee on someone's neck. However, Stanford's halls are filled with people, programs, and institutions that are anti-racist. Over the next weeks, months, and years, the Stanford community will respond to the tragedy of George Floyd's murder. There will be many responses—data-driven, compassionate, and models for others to follow. For those of us who are black, we must not give up no matter how hard the struggle because or surrender is victory to the cop with his knee on Mr. Floyd's neck. And to all our white colleagues, friends, and family at Stanford who commit to a life of anti-racism, we thank you for your support because we cannot do this alone. Together we will stand; divided, we will fall.

Take care,

Sam

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