

HEALTH

Kaiser Permanente possible target of discrimination lawsuit

**By East Bay Bureau
Special to Sentinel-Voice**
OAKLAND — African-American nurses and other employees at Kaiser Permanente are talking privately about organizing a class action lawsuit that will cite a pattern of racial discrimination against the state's largest HMO.

"You see it (racism) in some form every day," said one Black nurse. "It's subtle or right in your face. We have to deal with it and now we are tired of dealing with it."

The problem, however, will be getting Blacks to stand up and risk losing their jobs. In a series of interviews with *Sun-Reporter Publishing*, Blacks at Kaiser were candid about racial discrimination in the workplace.

Among their complaints:

Mostly women of color, and generally in the Oakland facility, were "red circled." The Licensed Vocational Nurses were demoted to medical assistants and saw their pay sliced by nearly \$4 an hour. Being "red circled" for up to two years resulted in a lack of promotions and regular staffers would get telephone calls early in the morning. It was Kaiser calling to say at the last minute that there would be no work for them today.

"People were afraid to answer their phones," one employee said.

Other Black LVNs complained that they had gone to school for years and studied long hours hoping to become Registered Nurses. But they have been told they would be "declassified" and were called "not safe" and reduced to

medical assistants. "You play by the rules. You worked hard. You go to school and sacrifice and you get held back because of the color of your skin," said one Black employee. "You want to cry. But then you tell yourself, be strong. I think about what my ancestors went through dealing with racists on the cotton plantation. That's what Kaiser is."

But many women say they are single parents or have too many bills to risk it all by speaking out. "People have learned to take it in and keep on going and that makes it seem like there are no problems. You hear about some "trouble makers" and they get written up. People hear that and stay quiet. But inside they are hurting."

Blacks who speak out or complain are monitored, even

by Blacks, looking to score points with white bosses, who report their observations to white supervisors. "They get written up, they get harassed and told they are late coming back from lunch or that they are leaving work too early," said one observer.

Other Blacks wonder why there is an Asian clinic with Asian doctors and nurses serving Asian patients? If language is the reason, why is there not a similar facility for Hispanics?

Black nurses also see Black patients getting mistreated. "They (Blacks) have a hard time getting appointments and many whites at Kaiser assume Blacks are into drugs and some Black patients are classified as having 'drug seeking behavior' involving uncontrolled substances. That is how many

whites view Blacks and that's a racist attitude."

Other Blacks point to age discrimination and note that many of the newly hired medical assistants are under 25.

Many Blacks have quit or retired because of the stress from racism and they have seen Blacks seeking jobs in management having to wait longer for a chance to move up than whites, who may have less qualifications. Many Blacks are in what is called support services. Few Blacks are in management, according to insiders.

"The LVNs were told that Kaiser didn't need so many LVNs and the Blacks were often at the low end of the totem pole," said one source.

When one Black nurse confronted a white nurse about

her behavior, the white nurse ran from the room feeling threatened, and complained to Human Resources.

"She felt she was going to get jumped on," said another nurse.

"Whites can show up late and do other things that Blacks hear about and nothing is said. Blacks would get written up or fired for some of the things they do. Is there a double standard for Blacks and whites? Yes. Hell, yes."

Many Blacks complain about being "floats." They are not sure where they will work or how many hours. They are promised 40 hours a week, but often they get only 20.

"They call you at the last minute and say don't come in. No work for you," said another source. "They run your life with this little mind game."

Children at risk of exposure to high levels of ozone

Special to Sentinel-Voice

HOUSTON — Children are more at risk of being exposed to high levels of ground-level ozone during the summer than adults, doctors say.

"Children have a growing respiratory tract and breathe in more air per pound of body weight than adults, so we tend to see a drop in lung function more in children," said Dr. Nick Hanania, assistant professor of medicine at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. "In addition, children are outside more than most adults during the summer and therefore are more susceptible to ground-level ozone exposure."

There are two types of ozone, one good, one bad. Ground-level ozone, or bad ozone, is an oxidant formed by exhaust from petrochemical plants or automobiles and can damage body tissue. Stratospheric ozone, or good ozone, is 10 to 15 miles away from the earth's surface and prevents ultraviolet light from penetrating to the earth.

"The sunlight, heat and humidity, all factors for high ground-level ozone levels, are highest during the midday period," said Hanania, who is also a lung specialist in the emergency center at the Harris County Hospital District's Ben Taub General Hospital in Houston. "It is best to change playtime to either the early morning or

late afternoon and keep children in an air conditioned facility as much as possible."

Asthmatics, 40 percent of whom are children, and the elderly are also at high risk of becoming ill from too much exposure to ozone and may suffer from chest tightness, a cough and breathing problems. Thus, it's important to keep tabs on ozone warnings and watches.

Healthy individuals, especially those who exercise or work outside on a daily basis, should not think they are immune to the effects of ozone exposure. "Researchers do not yet know what effect exposure to high levels of ground-level ozone will have on long-term health," Hanania said. "The best thing we can do right now is educate people on the health risks."

HEALTH FOCUS

Dehydration a serious summer hazard

**By James L. Phillips, M.D.
Special to Sentinel-Voice**

The front lawn isn't the only thing that needs water this summer.

So do your children.

Many parents are knowledgeable about the hazards of hot summer sun on tender young skin and take precautions with sunscreens. But they may not be aware of the dangers of dehydration.

In the sweltering heat, children can become dehydrated very quickly.

The best solution? Water, and plenty of it.

According to experts at the USDA/ARS Children's Nutrition Research Center at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, water, sports drinks and fruit juices are all good sources for keeping your children safe from the effects of dehydration.

Dehydration can cause children to become dizzy or drowsy, develop headaches and a dry mouth, and in severe cases, become unconscious. These are symptoms of heat exhaustion.

It is crucial to be careful when taking infants outdoors since they tend to become dehydrated quicker than older children. This tendency is in part due to their inability to communicate when they are thirsty.

Symptoms of dehydration include decreased urination and sunken eyes. Parents should be concerned if the baby's diaper is consistently dry.

Infants should not be exposed to the sun for long periods of time. Make sure to dress your baby in light-colored clothing and a hat even when going outside for a short time, and try to stay in the shade.

In older children, a preoccupation with playing outdoors can lead to dehydration. Kids are often so busy playing that they fail to drink adequate amounts of liquid.

In fact, thirst is an inadequate indicator of the amount of water that is needed. The amount needed depends on the heat and the humidity, the degree of activity, and the length of time spent outside.

This summer, make sure your children have plenty to drink before and during play time.

The extra effort can make it a safer summer for your active family.

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