



FROM THE EDITOR

THE AMERICAN DREAM

Joseph Conigliaro, MD, MPH, Editor in Chief, SGIM Forum

Last month, my mother, Giuseppina “Pina” Conigliaro, passed away after a short illness, a complication of a condition that she had been dealing with for more than 20 years. She was an amazing woman who lived the American dream—she immigrated to the United States in November 1954 from Ribera, Sicily, at the age of 18 with her mother, older sister, and younger brother. Because of the devastation of World War II and the hard life that followed, she never attended formal school. She arrived in New York, illiterate and unable to speak English. Despite this, she taught herself how to sign her name and do basic arithmetic. She came to a strange country, not knowing the language, with essentially nothing but relying on the kindness of friends and family who made the journey years earlier. I will always be inspired by the courage and perseverance by her and other immigrants who came here seeking a better life for themselves and their families. She continued to speak the Sicilian dialect of Italian as her primary language. One of my earliest exposures to the medical profession was accompanying her as interpreter to the many visits to physicians and hospitals. Like many young women in the late 50s and 60s, she learned how to operate a Singer sewing machine, joined the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, and worked in a factory as a dressmaker with many of her fellow immigrants from Sicily.

Thank you for allowing me to tell her story. I dedicate this editorial to her and to highlight the efforts our President, Dr. Karen DeSalvo, to make the social determinants of health (SDOH) a major theme this year. So much of my mother’s experience in health and health

care were linked to the SDOH that Dr. DeSalvo refers to in her current and previous president’s columns.¹ My mother’s access to healthcare was linked to her income and social status, and her status as an immigrant gave her limited access and choices for care. The initial medical conditions were directly related to occupational exposures and the understanding of her disease and her compliance to treatments were exacerbated by a lack of education and literacy. The era and her Sicilian culture colored her attitudes and beliefs regarding healthy behaviors, such as diet and exercise, the lack of which contributed to her later problems. In her advanced years, and after my father passed, her social supports and coping skills became more significant factors regarding her ability to stay healthy and functional.

In her June 2019 *Forum* column, Dr. DeSalvo stated that general internists have an important role in understanding and supporting interventions to address the social needs of their patients.¹ Through her work and others, I have come to understand how my mother’s SDOH and the implementation of those interventions or lack thereof had a major impact on her health and care.

I look forward to this year’s planning and attendance of the national meeting in Birmingham, Alabama, entitled “Just Care: Addressing the Social Determinants for Better Health.”

References

1. DeSalvo K. Building a physician workforce to address the social determinants of health. *SGIM Forum*. June 2019;(42)6.