

Hunter Sandlin: Standing Up to Health Inequities in Tuberculosis Diagnoses

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In this series, Pathways spotlights advocates of tuberculosis, the world's leading cause of death from an infectious disease.

Hunter Sandlin found tuberculosis the way many TBFighters did: through Nerdfighteria, an online community built by YouTube educators Hank and John Green.

Sandlin had been a member of the Nerdfighteria community for many years, and so when John Green started talking about tuberculosis, he was interested. Then, he learned of the Bedaquiline patent dispute, in which a pharmaceutical company attempted to extend its patent on a critical TB drug it had no right to. The TBFighters community mobilized and flooded the company's ethics hotline with calls until the line was shut down.

From there, he kept reading. He picked up *The Phantom Plague* by Vidya Krishnan, started attending webinars and talks, and found himself learning more and more about a disease he'd previously given little thought to. A software developer by profession, Sandlin now spends his free time in the TBFighters channel on the Nerdfighteria Discord, where a core group of dedicated members keeps everyone current on breaking developments in the field.

Sandlin says that one of the highlights of his advocacy experience was Hill Day, an annual gathering that brings TB advocates to Capitol Hill to meet with Congressional representatives. He describes the experience as very structured: a full day of training on the current legislative landscape and funding process, followed by meetings with staffers focused on public health.

“You talk to them about why this is an issue, why it's important to you as a constituent, and what you want from the representative,” he says.

What stays with him, though, is a troubling pattern he has noticed across survivor stories. At least three TB survivors he has encountered described the same experience: they were sick, they tested positive for tuberculosis, and their doctors moved past the result, assuming it was wrong. Each had to fight to even be believed.

“Imagine having the worst flu of your life for a few months and also having to stand up for yourself and tell a doctor no,” Sandlin said. “I'm very impressed by what a lot of them were able to do.”

The problem, he says, is less about negligence than about familiarity. In countries where tuberculosis is endemic, it's among the first things a doctor considers. In the United States, this diagnosis gets overlooked.

The disease also seems to affect under-resourced neighborhoods and those already dealing with poverty.

“TB follows injustice,” Sandlin said. “Tuberculosis is often a good inroad to talk about health inequity in general.”

That framing shapes how Sandlin thinks about the role students and community members can play. Talking about it, he says, is enough to start. At Hill Day, he posted a photo on his Instagram story. Three people who had no prior connection to TB advocacy messaged him because they had no idea tuberculosis was “still a thing.”

He also returns often to a couple of quotes from Paul Farmer, the late co-founder of Partners in Health. “Advocacy is doing hard things with friends,” said Farmer. He also liked to note, “local health is global health.”

Reflecting on his work, Sandlin says, “we just stopped paying attention to tuberculosis and researching it because it wasn't important to us; the United States, the rich Western world.” But, he describes, “the more you learn about it, the more everything connects.”