

Should we know the health of our political leaders ?

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By Dr Brighton Chireka

The question of the public's right to know about the health of their political leaders versus the leaders' right to privacy is an ongoing debate worldwide. No country has to my knowledge come up with a proper legislation to address this issue. One would have hoped that countries like America would have clear guidelines yet the truth is that they do not have the code of conduct to deal with the health of their leaders.

In America the debate is currently taking place about the health of Clinton or Trump. Presidential candidates do not undergo any kind of independent medical examination and they are not required to release their medical records either. The two candidates have shared some medical information with the public but what they have shared is not the full story. The things that people want to know about their leaders' health unfortunately has not been revealed.

The same problem is also faced by Africa where we witness the tight lipped of the leadership on their health. Commenting or even writing about the health of political leaders is risky and dangerous as one may be arrested or even be killed. We all know that diseases affect anyone and death will also visit everyone so there is no need to be secret about it. The media is like a hungry predator, which if not fed with information, will prey upon anything in its path. One would hope for a daily medical bulletin on the condition of a political leader who may be admitted in a hospital. Failure to do that can disable the country or scare investors.

The lack of clear rules and reporting conventions can cause dramatic turn of events each time a political leader is suspected to be unwell. You will notice the marathon of reporting in both the national and international media including self-claimed journalist on social media as well. We must remember that the health of political leaders has far-reaching implications on the running of a country and its people .

The doctors treating the political leader have a duty to their patient of keeping their patient's medical information private and confidential. Concern about patient privacy and confidentiality is as old as the practice of medicine itself. It is central to the doctor patient relationship so it must be respected. By its nature, health care is very personal, and patients have always told doctors things they would prefer that others not know. The desire to protect privacy is in part an outgrowth of a basic human desire to live free of intrusion, judgment and prejudice. The dilemma comes when the public wants to know the health of their leaders. Doctors can only go public if given the permission by the patient so it's pointless to pester them.

The debate is we all know that everyone is entitled to privacy but when a person goes into public life, he or she must understand there is sadly a price to pay when they run for public office. Being a public servants means putting the interests of the public ahead of yours. If a private matter affects the performance of the officeholder's duties , most people would agree that it is no longer private. So, for example, the president of the United States submits to a yearly physical, which is made public, because his or her health is of such key importance to the nation.

I would like to say that illnesses that affect job performance of any leader may be legitimate subjects of inquiry. Behaviours that might impede performance, like substance abuse, are matters of public interest. Failure to make these issues public through a guided media will result in a media free-for-all. Sometimes we see other doctors giving commentary about the condition of a political leader out of speculation. This is unwarranted and causes great harm to the nation. If only the politicians could know and make the information public in order to save the nation.

Examples of political leaders that did not reveal their health

There are many examples of the public's lack of knowledge regarding the health of its leaders. In the U.S. for instance, President Woodrow Wilson is reported to have hidden the fact that he suffered from heart disease and high blood pressure, and suffered a major stroke during his term in office. His condition was not disclosed to the American public, and his wife, along with his advisors, essentially ran the country.

President Franklin Roosevelt, is reported to have hide his polio and concealed hypertension and heart failure.

President John F. Kennedy is reported to have suffered from Addison's disease, which he covered up, and his doctor even went so far as to lie about it.

In Africa and Zimbabwe in particular , the health of our political leaders is kept secret. As a doctor I will respect the right of these politicians to privacy but when prominent people in our communities talk about their health ,it raises awareness and end the stigma to some of the diseases that we face. I hope we can debate and come up with clear guidelines to deal with the publicising of the health of our political leaders.

What do you think ? Please join in the discussion.

This article was compiled by Dr Brighton Chireka , who is a GP and a blogger based in Kent in the United Kingdom. Feel free to contact him at info@docbeecee.co.uk and you can read more of his work on his blog at [DR CHIREKA'S BLOG](#)

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