

In Dab We Trust  
by Gaby Tietyen-Mlengana '20

Living in a country that once spread “*la mission civilisatrice*” (the civilizing mission) around the world out of an obligation to humanity’s betterment, I found myself at odds with one thing in particular; hygiene. Now, this isn’t to say that people in Paris aren’t hygienic, not at all—although the French did invent perfume to hide the body’s natural no-shower musk. What I mean is that nobody there seems to have learned proper sneezing and coughing etiquette. The French spent 200 years going around the world deeming every non-western population inferior due to their way of life. Yet there standing across from me in the metro, a man sneezed a ferocious sneeze into the palms of his hands and proceeded to touch every surface he could reach. This was a common occurrence in Paris. For all the “*you Americainz are zo unhealty,*” at least I know not to sneeze into my hands.

Now, this wouldn’t have been such a huge problem, if, say, one or two people did it, but I literally never saw anyone get into the classic elbow sneeze “dab” position when a sneeze crept up on them. I on, the other hand, was looked at (maybe for other reasons) like a crazy person for having the audacity to sneeze into my elbow. Despite making my best efforts to avoid illness at all costs, I fell ill three times in two months. Imagine! The audacity. I knew I stood out in France. The Parisian looks of distaste were not lost on me, but for French bacteria to attack me not ONCE, not TWICE, but THREE times! That was definitely personal.

#

I’m used to being sick. In the US, you ride it out, go to work or school because productivity comes before health. In France, it’s the opposite. You go to the doctor anytime you’re sick. You have to for the illness to be excused by your employer or school. If “Ferris Bueller’s Day Off” had been made in France, it would have been titled “A Typical School Day with Jean-Pierre.” I get it: if a doctor’s visit costs 25 euros out of pocket with a 70% reimbursement, I’d go to the doctor all the time too (I did). In the US, after my mother gashed her head running into a concrete ledge, her first thought was the cost. She got in the car and drove home muttering repetitively “I can’t go to the ER. We don’t have money for the ER.” Upon returning home, the gash had bled so much that it looked like she had just murdered someone, and I—the brown kid next to her—looked like her unassuming accomplice. All this to say that healthcare in France was paradise for me. But when I fell ill this past December, all I wanted was to go to good old American Urgent Care.

#

My first two illnesses had been colds, a little bit of French Sudafedé and some over-priced throat spray helped get me through the month. My third illness was unlike the rest. You know those times when you get really sick, like actually so sick that you remember it for the rest of your life? Yeah, I had the privilege of getting that sick in Paris. For all that I love about Paris, trying to get medical care on a Friday night when you can barely leave your room is a pain in the derrière. It all started at 1 am Friday morning. I had a feeling that maybe I’d throw up, so I walked from my dorm room to the only toilet on the floor and waited for the feeling to go away. Much to my surprise, I returned to my room three hours later, after what I can only describe as a deep core workout. There was nothing left in my stomach, but my body didn’t want my ab sculpting to stop. I tried to keep water down, but at any sip, my body expelled it as if it was poison. I stayed cooped up in my room, sweating profusely despite feeling so cold that I had to take multiple showers to regain heat.

They say, “old habits die hard” and that they do. Why schedule a doctor’s appointment when I could just wait it out for a few hours? But after a whole day without water, I started to feel the effects. My head was pounding, weakness and confusion took over. I knew I was dehydrated, and my WebMD knowledge of acute dehydration sent me into a panic. I needed to go to Urgent Care, maybe get some fluids, an IV for sure. I tried to find an Urgent Care clinic, but that doesn’t really exist in France. You can go to the emergency room, but in my case, due to the ongoing hospital workers strike, you’d have to wait for hours before being seen. Well if I was going to die of dehydration, I might as well do it in the heart of Paris.

#

There’s this super cool website called [www.doctolib.fr](http://www.doctolib.fr) where you can find literally any doctor anywhere at any time. The great thing is that most doctors aren’t taking patients at 8 pm on a Friday night. I tried to find someone close. I basically had to drag myself out of bed to go to the bathroom so there was no way that I could take the metro in my state. There was a doctor within 10 minutes walking distance, so I scheduled and prepared to head out into the wilderness. Walking across Pont Marie to the Marais at a zombie-like pace I stood out more than ever. After almost running into a bike, I made it to the apartment complex.

That’s another thing, in Paris doctor’s offices are in random apartment buildings. I took the “4-person capacity” elevator (that when translated into American English actually means “2 non-French person capacity”) up to his office. The doctor greeted me like we were old friends. “Bonsoir!” he exclaimed. He was an older man with grey hair, tan slacks and a sweater, the stethoscope around his neck being the indication of his medical training. We walked into the examination room, which honestly could have doubled as a professor’s office. A desk, two chairs, a pile of books and papers.

“So, Madame, what’s going on?” He said, staring at his screen perplexed by the jumble of unorganized letters that is my last name. At least the mispronunciation of my name sounded better in French.

“I’ve been throwing up! I can’t even drink water! Oh, and I’ve been shaking, and also I sweat and th-”

“Madame, you’ll be fine just a little bug that’s going around. I’ll give you medication and you’ll be all good by tomorrow”

“But I haven’t had any water! I’m dehydrated!”

“When you leave, go to Franprix and get a cold Coca-Cola. Make sure that it’s cold! Yes, that should work. Let me take your vitals”

Upon trying to find my pulse he laughed. “Madame, it looks like your dead. I can’t find a pulse.”

I froze for a second, staring at him in fear as a small grin crept on to his face. It took me a moment to realize that this Parisian doctor was making a silly joke, lightening the mood. I’d become so accustomed to a level of snarky emotionless professional interactions that it took me off-guard. After being legal declared dead, it was time to pay.

“Alright, that’s going to be 40 euros (15 euros more due to the last-minute nature of my appointment), Carte Vitale?” He asked waiting for me to hand over the famous green card that gave you access to French socialized healthcare.

“Non, I’ll pay by credit card”

I cannot describe the look on people’s faces every time I paid for a medical service out of pocket. To me it was a steal, to them a tragedy. With my payment complete, I left the office with my prescription in tow.

#

It was close to 9 pm, which meant that all the pharmacies were about to close. I walked as fast as I could in my sick state, trying to find a store with a huge plus sign beaming a blinding green light. Voilà a pharmacy!

“Bonsoir, Madame. How can I help you?” Handing in my prescription, I was once again asked: “Carte Vitale?”

“Non”

“Uh...paperwork for an insurance refund?”

Considering that my yearly deductible is 5000 dollars, I knew that Anthem Blue Cross wouldn't accept some fancy French insurance refund.

“Alright so your total is 3 euros and 40 cents”

I paused; did he literally just ask me if I wanted to use insurance to pay for a medication that was 3.40 out of pocket? At that point, the medication is free. I paid hastily with so much joy, that I could get 40 pills for less than the price of a happy hour mojito. I went to Franprix, got my Coca-Cola, and walked home. And just like the doctor said, I was fine by the next day.

While I can mock the French all I want, they have the last laugh. I realized that the French don't have to dab, because healthcare in their country is treated as a human right. In the United States, sneezing into your elbow can be the difference between a 500-dollar doctor's visit and staying healthy. It's the difference between going into debt. It's the difference between putting your life on the line due to cost, all because of a healthcare system that puts profits before people. The French system has its faults. I'm not saying that it's perfect, but it's heaven compared to what I deal with now. I recently had an emergency and that “good old American Urgent Care” visit that I craved in France, cost me 300 dollars out of pocket. At 22, I live with a credit score ruined by the insurmountable costs of my chronic illness. This is the state of healthcare in the United States. Sadly, sneezing in dab formation is truly the only healthcare system that we can trust.

###

