



Health Professionals and War

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World has been engulfed in the flames of two military conflicts and they may spread. There are only a few who try to extinguish those and force the warring parties to negotiate. Many countries help one side or the other because they hope to benefit if they are on the winning side. Can medicine help to bring the participants to the peace talks? Here is what I did as a refugee and a medical doctor, due to the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina which lasted from March 1992 to December 1995. Some 140,000 Muslims, 97,000 Serbs and over 28,000 Croats were killed and more than two million people were displaced.¹

In 1998, I sent a letter and a few attachments to leading medical journals with the following suggestion: let us consider whether medicine can contribute to preventing war or ending an existing one. I mentioned the words of Rudolph Virchow, a German pathologist and politician, who stated that medicine must participate in political decisions in order to prevent diseases, sufferings and deaths – that was the birth of preventive medicine. Dudley Hrschbach's article "The dolphin oracle" was also attached; this American Nobel laureate points out a plea for communication.²

On 1 November 1998, Richard Smith, Editor-in-Chief of the British Medical Journal (BMJ), wrote to me:³

"Thank you for your letter and fascinating enclosures. I was particularly interested to read the article on The Dolphin Oracle.

I must admit that my immediate reaction to your letter suggesting that we may try to find a way to prevent it was to think the letter grandiose. But on reflections – and particularly after reading your enclosures – I began to think that perhaps we could do something. After all, I constantly carry Einstein's advice that it is better to light a candle than to live in darkness.

What I would like to do is to discuss with my editorial colleagues whether there is any way that we might contribute to your mission. One of these colleagues is Fiona Godlee, the President of WAME.

We will be meeting on November, 2nd, and I'll get to you as soon as possible after that meeting".

On 9 February 1999 Richard Smith wrote, again: *"The outcome of your letter for us was the enclosed editorial, which we published in our Christmas issue. It was posted - like everything else in the BMJ – on our website (www.bmj.com), and we have had a number of responses".*

Yusuf, Anand and MacQueen published an editorial entitled: "Can medicine prevent war? Imaginative thinking shows that it might".⁴ The authors stated that for every combatant killed in war, one non-combatant is also killed directly and 14-15 civilians lose their lives from loss of shelter, food and water or epidemics - and several times these numbers are physically or psychologically wounded. Medical professionals should join others to establish international agreements that would prevent certain weapons from being used,

in addition to nuclear and biological weapons. They also mentioned Virchow's words: "Medicine is a social science and politics is nothing but medicine on a grand scale."

Despite the fact that usage of cluster munitions have been banned by over 120 countries, two superpowers Russia and the USA did not sign the treaty and now the USA *via* Ukraine are using them in the Ukraine war. Cluster munitions disperse in dozens or hundreds smaller submunitions across a broad area, the size of a city block. This causes civilian casualties, as well. Some weapons do not explode immediately, but after months or years afterwards, like landmines. The voice of medical associations should be hired in Russia, the USA, Ukraine and Europe against using such deadly weapons.

Russia and Ukraine are both major global producers of grains. They are suppliers of wheat, barley, sunflower oil and other food that developing nations rely on. This war shall damage grain production and export. The Russians already occasionally block navy shipments of Ukrainian

grain. How many people shall die of hunger in the poorest countries?

The wars are now burning on a much larger scale than in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Medicine cannot turn its head away from seeing the carnage of soldiers, sufferings of civilians and destructions in these wars. The most dangerous thing is if any of these military conflicts spreads and if Russia or Israel find herself on the verge of defeat, the Russians and Israelis can use atomic weapons. This would be a catastrophe for humanity and preventing that black scenario is the most important current task of health associations, as well as prominent medical individuals.⁵

Doctors and other healthcare workers should influence citizens in the countries involved in war to contribute to the general anti-war mood. That is how medicine can increase the pressure on the sides that participate in war and countries that help to maintain war. Medical professionals can develop "group health mind" and with medical associations turn politicians to the negotiations and peace.

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Conflict of interest

None.

References

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