

Policy Statement on Health Through Peace

Passed Spring General Assembly 2017

Note: This statement was passed before the organisation's name change from Medsin-UK to Students for Global Health. The statement will still remain active for three years.

Health Through Peace

Introduction

Peace is integral to long term improvement in global health. Health workers have a proud history of helping to build peace; in this troubled time they must unite and renew their calls for peace. Medsin and its members will campaign, both within the UK and internationally, to promote peace.

Definitions of Terms

The definition of peace is a matter of considerable academic debate. In the same way that health is not the absence of disease, positive peace is not just an absence of war. Positive peace must include an end to all forms of violence and a system which acts for all those in a community.¹ It is important the global health movement strives for this positive peace, rather than focusing only on negative peace which is simply an absence of conflict.

The movement of health through peace argues that a key way to make sustainable gains in global health is by peace building. Not only by promoting negative peace by arguing for cease fire agreements or bans on certain kinds of weapons but by supporting programmes building positive peace which create systems of accountability which encourage nonviolent solutions to conflict.

Background

The World Health Assembly stated in 1981 "the role of physicians and other health workers in the preservation and promotion of peace is the most significant factor in the attainment of health for all."²

Health workers have organised a number of campaigns to live up to this goal. International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) was founded in 1980 to facilitate international collaboration between doctors to oppose nuclear weapons. In 1985, they were awarded the Nobel Peace prize for their work and still continue to oppose nuclear weapons today.³

Opposition to nuclear weapons is not limited to IPPNW; the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has also supported recent international efforts to negotiate a ban treaty. ICRC believes that the scale and indiscriminate nature of these weapons would mean that no meaningful humanitarian response could be mounted after their use.⁴ Furthermore, since 1998 the British Medical Association (BMA) has also supported a total ban on nuclear weapons.⁵

Health workers also campaign to control the sale of other kinds of weapons. Campaigns to ban landmines and cluster munitions included health workers and led to successful treaties banning these weapons.⁶ IPPNW were part of the coalition of civil societies which led to the arms trade treaty.⁷ In the UK, the BMA opposes the international arms trade not just because of direct harm from weapons but because the trade "distorts

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national economies and increases debts, diverting resources from alleviation of poverty and sustainable development".⁸

In terms of education, the organisation Medical Peace Work has created a number of educational resources to help educate health workers about the link between health and peace. They have created a package of eLearning modules which anyone can access for free.⁹ Medact, the UK affiliate of IPPNW, is organising a conference in York in September 2017 to bring together members of the international health community to discuss Health through Peace.¹⁰

Rising Levels of Violence Globally

It appears that a trend of increasing peace, which has been observed since the end of the Cold War two decades ago, has ended. Global conflicts, such as in Syria, seem unlikely to end soon and threaten to destabilise whole regions.¹¹ Despite international efforts to negotiate a ban treaty for nuclear weapons, no current nuclear weapon state will engage with the process.¹²

Attacks on health workers have increased and this has become a regularly used tactic in some conflicts. Despite a clear legal situation making this illegal under International Humanitarian Law, no robust sanctions have been applied to those that attack hospitals. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) has closed hospitals and removed workers due to security concerns. MSF with a coalition of humanitarian organisations and NGOs has repeatedly called for investigations and accountability to be determined, but has yet to see satisfactory international interest in protecting health workers in conflict.¹³

In this context, it is vital that responsible governments understand how promoting peace is important to global health. The UK is not behaving responsibly. In 2016, the UK began the process of replacing and upgrading its nuclear weapons.¹⁴ In September 2017, the UK will host one of the largest arms fairs in Europe. The Defence and Security Equipment International (DSEI) describes itself as the 'world's leading event' bringing together arms dealers and militaries from across the globe. It is held at London Excel centre every other year and it will start on the 12th of September 2017.¹⁵ At the previous DSEI in 2015, Amnesty International was turned away and on numerous occasions illegal instruments of torture have been advertised at the event.¹⁶ Numerous repressive regimes and governments accused of attacks on health workers have previously attended, including Saudi Arabia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Thailand.¹⁷

The on-going judicial review into the UK's sales of arms to Saudi Arabia also highlights the UK's failure to make decisions with global health in mind. The Saudi led coalition in Yemen has been accused of attacking civilian areas and health facilities, but despite this the UK government authorised over £3 billion of arms sales to the regime during the conflict.¹⁸ The UK government is yet to take any steps to prevent the flow of weapons to this conflict.

Main Text

Medsin believes that:

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Peace and health are symbiotically related; any advocate for global health should also advocate for peace building. Medsin believes that the current global climate demands a renewed focus on the fact that health and peace are positively associated.

We join other members of the international health community in stating clearly that Medsin:

1. Supports efforts to create a ban treaty for nuclear weapons
2. Opposes the development of any replacement for the Trident nuclear weapons system
3. Strongly condemns attacks on hospitals and health workers
4. Opposes the international arms trade and its focus on profits rather than global health
5. Opposes the DSEI arms fair and calls on the UK government to cancel the event

The General Assembly of Medsin calls for:

1. Voting members to:

- Understand and promote the link between global health and peace
- Advocate for peace building as a pathway towards improved global health
- Support organisations that promote Health through Peace. Including but not limited to: IPPNW, Medact, Medical Peace Work, Medics Under Fire
- Support organisations advocating for accountability for attacks on health facilities. This includes, but is not limited to, MSF.

2. Branches to:

- Organise educational events discussing the links between global health and peace
- Engage with other organisations on campus that promote peace
- Lobby their Universities to include material about peace in global health teaching

3. The National Committee of Medsin to:

- Assign a responsible person within Medsin to liaise with the Health through Peace Movement
- Develop and adapt teaching materials on the link between health and peace for use by branches.
- Put together a working group to discuss issues of health and peace that will support other aspects of Medsin's current work and reports to the policy and advocacy director.
- Support campaigns to oppose the UK nuclear weapons system on health grounds
- Advocate for a system with strong accountability mechanisms for those that attack health facilities. Bring these arguments to the UK Government and international actors.

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