

Letter to the Royal College of Physicians (London): Take Anti-Israeli Politics out of Medicine

Prof. Oded Abramsky MD PhD FRCP: Department of Neurology, Hadassah-Hebrew University Medical Center, Jerusalem, Israel

KEY WORDS: medical journals, politics, Middle East

IMAJ 2009;11:334

In the February 2009 issue of *Commentary*, an official organ of the Royal College of Physicians of London, there appeared a very incendiary 'special article' entitled "Physicians in Palestine." This one-sided and very inaccurate article made a number of erroneous claims: 1) that Israel is directly responsible for the lack of medical supplies, equipment and proper training of physicians throughout the Palestinian territories, 2) that Israel hampers the freedom of movement of Palestinian physicians in the conduct of their work, 3) that Palestinian physicians are prevented from traveling abroad for training or for attending conferences, 4) that British physicians should conduct visits to Gaza City to end its 'isolation', 5) that British hospitals, medical schools and physicians should undertake teaching and exchange programs to counteract the mistreatment rendered by Israeli authorities, and 6) a sidebar went so far as to refer to the "massacre" of Palestinian civilians during Operation Cast Lead.

In response to this outrageous political polemic in the guise of a 'special article' in a medical publication, I wrote the following response, which was sent to the editor on 22 February 2009:

Until I received the February 2009 issue of *Commentary*, I was proud to bear the title of Fellow by Distinction of the Royal College of Physicians. Since then, my pride is greatly diminished. My outrage over the one-sided and inaccurate presentation of the state of medicine in Gaza is exceeded only by my outrage over the blatant mixing of medicine and partisan politics, a blend which should never be tolerated.

Allow me to set the record straight: the Hamas junta in Gaza is a terrorist organization that has been rightly denounced as such by the European Union and the United States. They have fired over 5000 rockets and mortars into sovereign Israeli territory in the last eight years with the sole aim of killing civilians. Their abuse of medical infrastructure for terrorist purposes (e.g.,

inserting IVs into terrorists and then smuggling them across borders in ambulances; the hiding of terrorists and Hamas leaders in the wards and basements of the very hospitals you mention) have been well-documented. There is not one Israeli soldier or civilian in Gaza; your reference to occupied Palestinian territories in reference to Gaza is utterly fallacious. There was no massacre in Gaza on 27 December 2008. "Massacre" is "indiscriminate and wanton killing." Fire-bombing Dresden was massacre; attacking uniformed soldiers and policemen engaged in offensive action is not. This is not to say that there were not innocent civilian casualties in the Gaza campaign; there were, but none were wanton or indiscriminate. There is no truth to your claim that Gazan medical personnel are not allowed to attend medical conferences and receive training abroad. Some may not be allowed to leave Gaza via Israel but the Egyptian border is at their disposal. The level of cooperation between Israeli and Gazan hospitals and medical personnel and the cross-border treatment of the ill and wounded is without question greater than between any two other entities in the world who are nominally (and sometimes actively) at war. Therefore, please keep medicine and politics separate, for the good of all, as we try to do in Israel.

I received a reply from the editor, Professor Robert Allan, on 3 March 2009, indicating that the original *Commentary* article had been rushed through the publication process without adequate editorial review. The reply indicated that the College President had issued an apology, especially for the use of the heavily laden word "massacre." The apology is available online at <http://www.rcplondon.ac.il/members/affairs/090217apology.asp>.

On 8 March 2009, I again wrote to the editor thanking him for his response but requesting that the apology itself be published in the journal, ideally in as prominent a way as the original article on 1 April 2009. Prof. Allan, the editor of *Commentary*, has informed me that: "the apology will be reprinted in the next edition of the *Commentary* along with a selection of the correspondence."

[abramsky@hadassah.org.il]