

Medicine for Peace: An Ethical and Professional Imperative

A Medicina pela Paz: Imperativo Ético e Profissional

Carlos CORTES¹

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In recent years, and particularly in the current international context, ethical and humanitarian boundaries have come under severe threat by armed conflicts in different regions of the world. The global medical community has witnessed an increasing violation of international norms, with deliberate attacks on civilians, healthcare professionals and hospitals, together with an unsettling proliferation of weapons, including nuclear weapons. These issues have always been a cause of deep concern for doctors in Portugal.

Prestigious international medical journals – including The Lancet, The BMJ, The Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) and The New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM) – have led the voices against this barbarism, emphasizing that peace is a crucial condition for public health and sustainable human development.¹

On the ground, healthcare professionals have been direct targets of war violence. Indiscriminate attacks have been the cause of thousands of deaths, including children, the elderly and healthcare professionals, with deliberate damage to hospitals and ambulances. In addition to immediate deaths and injuries, the health system has suffered major disruptions under the conflicts, compromising vaccination, treatment of chronic diseases and mental health, with devastating consequences for generations. The impacts on other regions of the globe are equally alarming.

These attacks correspond to blatant war crimes and demand a firm response from the international community. Healthcare professionals are guided by ethical and humanitarian oaths, playing a crucial role as guardians of human dignity, regardless of the parties involved in conflicts, and must be protected and never targeted militarily. Medical neutrality should not be interpreted as indifference to atrocities, but as an ethical and moral duty to denounce abuses and demand accountability.

Recent publications from the medical and scientific community clearly demonstrate that the effects of war transcend immediate combat. Children, the elderly, and other especially vulnerable people are often the most affected, suffering devastating consequences including infectious dis-

eases, severe malnutrition, deterioration in mental health, disruption in crucial services, and deep trauma that lasts a lifetime.^{2,3} Accurate studies warn that every armed conflict leaves deep marks on public health, especially affecting these vulnerable populations, prolonging the damage for decades after the end of the fighting.³ Therefore, preventing wars means protecting the most vulnerable, preventing disease and ensuring that universal access to healthcare is always defended as a fundamental human right.

In addition, armed conflicts have resulted in forced displacement and massive humanitarian crises, causing millions of refugees.⁴ In these contexts, doctors play a crucial role, not only by providing immediate support in conflict zones, but also by caring for those who have been forced to flee. International medical solidarity and adequate resettlement, based on ethical principles of justice and equity, are essential to protect the rights and health of refugees.

In this sense, the Portuguese medical community, through the Portuguese Medical Association, medical associations, medical unions and scientific societies, join the international appeal in defense of peace. These Portuguese medical entities reiterate the urgent importance of an immediate ceasefire and full protection for healthcare professionals in conflict zones, as well as an unequivocal commitment to medical neutrality, the preservation of human life and effective medical support for refugees and displaced people.⁵

Doctors in Portugal and around the world must strengthen their active and influential voice for global peace. Doctors have the moral and professional authority aimed at combating violence, ensuring medical protection and calling for public policies that prioritize human life and dignity above any war or political interests.

May this commitment to peace be assumed and continually renewed by all doctors worldwide, always keeping in mind that the first duty of medicine is the preservation of life and relief of human suffering for all, without discrimination or exception. In this context, Portuguese doctors uphold a firm ethical and professional commitment to peace, justice, and human dignity under all circumstances.

1. President. Portuguese Medical Association. Lisbon. Portugal.

✉ Autor correspondente: Carlos Cortes. ccortes@gmail.com

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