Health professionals working in organisations promoting health through social and environmental justice have a good track record.

Poverty is the greatest violence

Ghandi

Do health professionals have a responsibility to identify, and attempt to correct the social and environmental wrongs that so undermine our personal and collective health? The organisation of which I am presently chairman, Medact, has 2000 members whose unequivocal answer to this question is YES. Furthermore, the impact of healthy professionals working over the past 50 years in the two parent organisations from which Medact evolved, shows that this unequivocal response is rooted in good evidence, essential in this day of obsessive obeisance to evidence based decision making.

What then of Medact’s parents? Fifty years ago several now eminent doctors, horrified by the slaughter and destruction unleashed on the globe by the second world war were fearful that nuclear weapons would be used against China in the Korean War (1950–53). Concerned that the conflict might then escalate into a third world war they founded the Medical Association for the Prevention of War (MAPW). I joined this organisation, recognising the strength of the argument that conflict originated in a mind set that violence and war somehow offered real hopes for fair and just solutions to problems. To counter this MAPW argued that a fair and just social and economic order was a morally better and practically more effective solution. MAPW set out to unite doctors in efforts to prevent war and to consider the profession’s ethical responsibility in this respect. MAPW lobbying helped end the embargo on urgent medical supplies to China in the Korean crisis. MAPW organised the first international conference on the pathogenesis of war, at the Hague, Dr Spock, an enthusiastic supporter, addressed one such conference on the importance of the doctor as a citizen activist.

At the end of the 1970s at the height of the cold war, NATO announced that nuclear weapons would be used against China in the Korean War (1950–53). Consequently, the MAPW argued that a fair and just social and economic order was a morally better and practically more effective solution. MAPW set out to unite doctors in efforts to prevent war and to consider the profession’s ethical responsibility in this respect. MAPW lobbying helped end the embargo on urgent medical supplies to China in the Korean crisis. MAPW organised the first international conference on the pathogenesis of war, at the Hague, Dr Spock, an enthusiastic supporter, addressed one such conference on the importance of the doctor as a citizen activist.

By the late 1970s it was clear that nuclear weapons were being developed by the NATO and Eastern bloc nations to be used in wars between the two blocs. In 1978, the MAPW argued that the development of nuclear weapons was one of the greatest threats to world health. MAPW set out to unite doctors in efforts to prevent war and to consider the profession’s ethical responsibility in this respect. MAPW lobbying helped end the embargo on urgent medical supplies to China in the Korean crisis. MAPW organised the first international conference on the pathogenesis of war, at the Hague, Dr Spock, an enthusiastic supporter, addressed one such conference on the importance of the doctor as a citizen activist.

The Medical Campaign against Nuclear weapons (MCANW) was formed. MCANW, working in partnership with other affiliates of the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) formed at much the same time, had a major impact on subsequent events. Although we have a long way to go before the elimination of nuclear weapons (still a major threat to our existence) there is now a call to go beyond current nuclear arms reduction treaties to total nuclear weapons (still a major threat to our existence) there is now a call to go beyond current nuclear arms reduction treaties to total nuclear weapons. Our judgement of the International Court of Justice at The Hague in 1997 suggested that the use or threat of use of such weapons was a breach of International Humanitarian Law.

Our response to these questions clarified to us the grounds for our opposition to nuclear weapons. Our members contributed to the classic report The Medical Effects of Nuclear War which was written and published by the BMA, and which changed policy on civil defence. Unravelling the logic behind and implications of the development and threatened use of nuclear weapons taught us several other important lessons. Nuclear weapons underpinned the political economic and military dominance of a few nations over the rest of the globe, and the tussle between these few nations was at the root of many wars, both military and economic that scarred the second half of the 20th century. A consequence of all this was the increase in absolute poverty (presently defined as an income of less than $1/day) that now afflict 1.2 billion people worldwide. We recognised as early as 1987 that the third world debt was one health destroying marker of this global dominance, as was the arms trade. The environmental threats associated with nuclear weapons were also becoming clearer.

The main thrust of our recent work has been on economic policy and health, and in particular on the health implications of economic globalisation. Medact, working in association with partners in Holland and Finland, and part funded by a European Commission funded project the umbrella organisation promoting the need for a nuclear weapons convention as a means of spelling out the practical steps necessary to get us to a nuclear free world. The need for such a convention was overwhelmingly supported by the annual representative meeting of the BMA in 1998.

As part of our dialogue with decision makers and in conjunction with colleagues form IPPNW, we have held regular meetings with the UK foreign and commonwealth office. We have also travelled to countries such as Scandinavia, Belgium, the USA, Nigeria, Pakistan, China, North Korea, and Russia to talk with senior decision makers in these countries about the health and other benefits of abolition. Within the wider context in which we now work, we have embarked on a series of other initiatives. We started with others the campaign against land mines, organising the first meeting of the International Campaign to ban land mines in 1992. Our continued involvement in this campaign makes us an affiliated member of the International Campaign to ban land mines, Nobel Peace Prize winners in 1997. Medact is a founder member of the Jubilee 2000 coalition campaigning for the relief of third world debt, and successfully encouraged both the BMA and the Royal Colleges to give their support to this campaign.

We have broadened our understanding of the environmental threats to health, and held the first public meeting in the UK on global warming and health in 1994. Our continued work on environment and health has been on policy formulation, which has contributed to a clearer understanding of the way in which the determinants of health relate to other and to wider socioeconomic changes.

Our work on the psychology of violence and mediation has continued. Medact volunteers have visited several war zones: to assist UNICEF psychosocial programmes, and we have an active commitment to understand the issues of refugee health. This has culminated in a country wide series of seminars on refugee health, some in association with the King’s Fund, at which the idea that Medact could act as a coordinating centre for refugee health issues was strongly supported.

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grant, has produced a series of seminal documents on the health impact of various policies pursued by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organisation. Medact continues to lobby these organisations, as well as key figures in the European Commission and the UK government on a range of economic, trade and, health policy issues.

Our track record over the past 50 years shows that we have consistently identified new threats to global health before they have become widely apparent, and been in the forefront of alerting colleagues, decision makers, and the general public to such threats. This we have done through the very considerable efforts of a dedicated office staff, and many activists who give both their time and money to the organisation.

With my optimism of the spirit, I dream of a day when our work will no longer be necessary, but with my pessimism of the intellect recognise that I and many of our present members will be dead long before this happens. Medact’s work is unfortunately still vital. Even now there are new global health threats emerging, such as those posed by persistent organic pollutants.

We must continue with our policy making, educating ourselves as well as other health professionals and the general population, and step up the pressure on decision makers to resolve the problems we have identified. Numbers matter, and we need as many colleagues as possible to help in our work, and invite all health professional to join us.

When I feel daunted I remember Anita Roddick’s aphorism, “If you think you are too small to make an impact try going to bed with a mosquito.”

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THE JECH GALLERY

Traditional healers, still part of the community health systems in the Andes

Traditional medicine in the Andes moves us automatically to the figure of traditional healers, and, in some cases, automatically to censure their work. Albeit they have been present in the community health system for many years, they do not seem to fit into the modern model of medicine and health care. Nevertheless, they retain years of knowledge about the use of local medicinal plants. The knowledge differs between traditional healers from different places; accordingly, for example, to the proliferation of flora at certain altitudes. Most of them act as “hidden agents” and only become “visible” when peasants with specific “problems for the traditional healer” need them. We intended—through a respectful approach that recognises the value of their experience—to demonstrate their resources commonly used for certain conditions, to share between them their knowledge, and to teach young people. The picture shows a traditional healer (man, standing on the left) from Ccatupata community during a community exhibition and exchange of medicinal plants.

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Peruvian Programme, Health Unlimited, Ayacucho, Peru
Traditional healers, still part of the community health systems in the Andes

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