

Protection of health care workers and facilities in Gaza and elsewhere

Statement by Australian health professionals from Palestinian, Jewish and other backgrounds (December 28 2023)

We are a concerned group of Australian health professionals from Palestinian and Jewish backgrounds, joined by colleagues from other backgrounds, who come together within our diverse community united by humanitarian views and respect for the sanctity of life. We feel compassion for the suffering of others, regardless of their ethnicity, religion or beliefs, or the countries or political or other groups with which they identify.

Together, we declare our distress at the conflict in Israel and Gaza which has followed the attack on October 7 and the death, injuries and displacement of civilians, while recognising the long-standing and unresolved issues which may have precipitated it. We express solidarity with fellow health care workers in Gaza and elsewhere, many of whom have risked their lives to serve others. We condemn attacks on health care professionals and infrastructure and on those seeking medical assistance.

According to multiple sources, as of December 28 2023, 278 health care workers have been killed, including 104 physicians and several intergenerational medical families, 87 nurses and 87 paramedics. Further, more than 70 medical staff have been arrested and taken to unknown locations.^{1,2,3,4} The Head of Al Shifa Hospital, Dr Muhammad Abu Salmiya, arrested on November 22 with other health care workers, continues to be detained.^{5,6,7} The list of health care worker casualties is incomplete and continues to increase.

In addition to the attacks on individual health professionals, there have been 364 attacks on Gaza health care facilities, including hospitals, primary health care facilities and 190 ambulances.⁸ Health care facilities and institutions that have been bombed,⁹ damaged or shut down include: Al Ahli Arab Hospital,¹⁰ Gaza only cancer Hospital, the Turkish Palestinian Friendship Hospital,^{11,12} Abdel Aziz Al-Rantizi Paediatric Hospital,^{13,14,15} Al Nasr Paediatric Hospital,¹⁶ Al Quds Hospital,¹⁷ The International Eye Hospital,¹⁸ The Psychiatric Hospital,¹⁹ Al Wafa Rehabilitation Hospital,²⁰ the Al Wafa elderly's care centre,²¹ Al Durrah Children's Hospital (targeted with prohibited white phosphorus on October 12), the Indonesian Hospital,²² Shifa Hospital, two medical schools (the Islamic University of Gaza and Al Azhar University Medical School) as well as medical and dental students. In addition, an MSF evacuation convoy, an outpatients burn unit in Gaza city, an MSF minibus, a Red Cross ambulance convoy and Palestine Red Crescent Society ambulance centre in Jabalya were attacked. Further, Palestine Red Crescent Society operations have been suspended owing to depletion of necessary supplies and reduced ability to evacuate

patients.^{2,23,24,25,26,27,28,29,30} Of the 36 hospitals in Gaza, 27 are now non-functional and 9 at best partially functional, all operating at more than double capacity in the face of critical deficiencies of fuel and other supplies. Similarly, out of 72 primary health care facilities, 54 ceased operating due to damage lack of fuel or insecurity.^{22,31,32,33} UN shelters are over-crowded, with outbreaks of hepatitis A, meningitis, chicken pox, lice, scabies, upper respiratory tract and skin infections, and diarrhoeal illnesses, on the background of starvation and lack of water and sanitation.^{34,35}

These circumstances constitute a public health catastrophe. As health professionals with backgrounds on different sides of the conflict, we affirm our united purpose and undivided commitment to the values that underlie medical practice, the need to protect health care workers and those seeking medical assistance, and to the search for strategies that might alleviate this crisis.

Along with colleagues elsewhere,³⁶ we urge all health professionals, medical colleges, professional organisations and health educational institutions in Australia to join us by similarly voicing opposition to the incapacitation of the health care system in Gaza and by advocating publicly for an immediate and permanent ceasefire and for the release and return to their families of all persons on both sides who have been detained, the protection of health care workers, the reconstruction of health care facilities and medical educational institutions, and the delivery of supplies necessary to provide optimal care for all those needing it.

We see this statement as an opportunity to begin a conversation among health professionals in Australia about the matters raised in this letter and invite others to join us.[*]

Disclaimer: The information and references presented herein are intended to provide an overview of the health crisis in Gaza. Every effort has been made to gather the most accurate and up-to-date data from multiple sources. However, it is important to note that the information is based on emerging data, and the accuracy of the content cannot be guaranteed.

[*] For enquiries or further details about this statement, please contact Prof Paul Komesaroff, paul.komesaroff@monash.edu, or A/Prof Hadia Haikal- Mukhtar, hadia@meandus.com.

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Disclaimer: "The responsibility for the accuracy of signatories' data lies with those who have signed the statement. We present the information in good faith, as provided, without undergoing verification."

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