

POLICE VIOLENCE IN THE TOWNSHIPS - WHAT CAN WE, AS HEALTH WORKERS, DO?

Police brutality can be seen all around South Africa almost every day - in Langa, Alexandra, Kimberley, Sebokeng, Sharpeville, Crossroads, Tumahole, and many other townships.

What can we, as health workers, do?

Firstly, health workers must join in with other people and deplore the state's continual attacks on innocent people. As health workers, we must reaffirm our commitment to oppose apartheid and all it stands for.

But that alone is not enough.

As the state has increased its control over every aspect of our lives, so it has encroached on the delivery of medical and health services. We have heard many stories of state "involvement" in the medical care of unrest victims and detainees. We have even heard of health workers who were intimidated. We only need to think back to the case of Steve Biko, and more recently, the dismissal of the ambulance drivers who gave evidence of police brutality to the Kannemeyer Commission.

Health workers must fight for their right to treat all patients free from political and other pressures. Even the State Department of Health and Welfare aims to support the Tokyo Declaration by publishing it in their publication "The Medical Practitioner in the Health Service". In this declaration, it says,

"A doctor must have complete clinical independence in deciding upon the care of a person for whom he or she is medically responsible. The doctor's fundamental role is to alleviate the distress of his or her fellow men, and no motive whether personal, collective or political shall prevail against this higher purpose."

But the problem of inadequate health care goes beyond state interference.

The inadequate distribution of medical services in South Africa means that health workers in most black urban areas are badly equipped to deal with the daily health needs of the local population, let alone the needs during a crisis.

In the publication of the State Department of Health and Welfare which was quoted above, an extract from the International Code of Medical Ethics is published:

"A doctor must give emergency care as a humanitarian duty unless he is assured that others are willing and able to give such care."

Thus, as health workers, we should do the following:

- We should publicly and continuously support a medical code such as the Tokyo Declaration. Progressive health workers must begin to define their roles vis-a-vis the state in times like the present.
- We should stand firmly by our right and our duty to treat anyone in any situation, free from intimidation and harassment, especially in providing emergency care where it is needed most.
- We should research, document, and publish the nature of the atrocities that are committed during civil unrest, and the failure of the health system to oppose any forces which undermine its primary purpose.
- We should challenge the state, provincial, and municipal health bodies and hospital superintendents to take a public stand on the crucial issue of patient rights during times of unrest.

There is a third aspect in which health workers should get involved.

As townships are often sealed off during police raids and unrest, people in the townships have hardly any access to emergency treatment by health professionals.

An alternative way to meet the needs for emergency treatment during times of crisis is to train members of communities in first aid and life-saving and in management of medical emergencies such as blunt trauma, bullet wounds, tear gas injuries, burns, etc.

NEWS

Resolution of the American Psychiatric Association

RESOLUTION AGAINST APARTHEID

It is the belief of the American Psychiatric Association that when discrimination is practiced by governments in an organized fashion, the mental health of all of its citizens is affected, not only those against whom discrimination is directed.

Be it resolved, therefore, that the American Psychiatric Association strongly opposes the South African government's policy of apartheid as being discriminatory and damaging to the mental health of the South African people and further urges the Society of Psychiatrists of South Africa and the World Psychiatric Association to voice opposition to this policy and to launch a vigorous protest against all aspects of discrimination in that country.

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