Offline: The “pess-optimists” of health in Palestine

Tony Laurance is a Briton abroad with a difficult mission. He is WHO’s Head of Office for the occupied Palestinian territory. At a meeting held last week in Beirut, he spoke about the barriers facing Palestinians who need to access health services. He described their requirements for health care as “pretty basic rights”. But he invited his audience of over 150 researchers and health professionals from 15 countries to consider the realities facing the 4·1 million women, children, and men of Palestine. In Gaza, 1·6 million people are squeezed into a strip of land 5 km × 40 km. They are surrounded by a wall. There is no easy access to health care across that wall, even for the sickest and those most in need. In the West Bank, there are 86 Israeli checkpoints and 521 road closures. Laurance described the situation as “a dramatically reduced space” for Palestinians to live and move within. Given these predicaments, are Palestinians denied the right to access health services by Israeli movement restrictions in Gaza and the West Bank? WHO’s clear answer is “yes”. “The right to health of Palestinians is compromised”, reported Laurance. “The only way to remove [the restrictions on access to healthcare] is to remove the occupation itself.”

The conference he was speaking at—Health of Palestinians: Inside and Outside the Occupied Palestinian Territory—took place at the American University of Beirut (AUB). It was the fourth meeting of The Lancet-Palestinian Health Alliance, a loose group of researchers which includes Graham Watt (University of Glasgow), Iain Chalmers (James Lind Initiative), Rita Giacaman and Abdullatif Hussinei (Birzeit University), Rana Khatib (Welfare Association), Huda Zurayk and Iman Nuwayhid (AUB), Gerd Holmboe-Ottesen and Espen Bjertness (University of Oslo), John Yudkin (University College London), and Rajaie Batniji (Stanford University). Why are we holding these annual gatherings? Because research about the health of Palestinians is “disqualified knowledge”, said Rita Giacaman. The paralysis of the international community when confronted by the plight of the Palestinian people means that health professionals must find better ways to draw the human harms of occupation to the attention of politicians and policy makers.

The reason for meeting in Beirut was to emphasise another and often ignored dimension of Palestinian health—the 280 000 refugees living in 12 dangerous and desolate camps in Lebanon (“Lebanon is the worst” for refugee health, said one participant). Palestinians in these camps endure poor health services, unsafe and crowded housing, unreliable water supplies, and antiquated waste disposal facilities. Over 80% of camp inhabitants have a chronic illness. Over half have poor mental health. Two-thirds of young people aged over 15 years are not in school. Adults are denied jobs and full citizenship rights. In Arabic, the people of the refugee camps express and represent a state of “ghorba”—dispossession, estrangement, and nostalgia.

Many parties are responsible for what is happening today in Palestine. Rajaie Batniji showed how, despite the occupied territory having the highest development assistance for health of any Arab nation, the country has seen little progress towards strengthening its health system. Why is this? The odd truth is that we know very little about what happens to donated money. Where does it go? What effect does it have? Angelo Stefanini is one of the occupied territory’s most experienced international aid workers. He provided some clues to these questions. “Aid in a conflict is not neutral”, he said. Donor aid can be used as a weapon to mesmerise and weaken Palestinian institutions. And it is invested into enormous white elephants—unsustainable hospitals, instead of an urgently needed primary care system.

“The occupation attempts to crush spirits”, concluded the Dean of AUB’s Faculty of Health Sciences, Iman Nuwayhid. It is failing to achieve its goal. Two days in Beirut were an investigation into Palestinian ingenuity and innovation in the face of persistent injustice. Far from crushing spirits, the occupation is strengthening the resolve of Palestinians and their professional colleagues to achieve the right to health and dignity that all peoples of this world have long been promised. Peer-reviewed research abstracts from the meeting will be published later this year.

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