



## *Medical Students Envisage a Healthy Future*

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Every human being on the planet has the right to basic nutrition and health. Yet, the United Nations estimates that as many as 963 million people in the world are undernourished [i]. A combination of economic and geographical factors conspires to deprive people of sustainable access to safe, nutritious, and palatable food. Consequently, a substantial and increasing proportion of the population is denied health and therefore cannot hope to live productive lives. Some countries have a significant percentage of their population living below the poverty line, limiting their ability to access health care. In some African countries, this proportion may be as high as eighty percent [ii]. Private expenditure on health care plunges another 100 million individuals into poverty every year [iii, iv]. This evidence for Tudor Hart's inverse care law remains a shameful indictment for government policy the world over [v].

Expenditure on weapons and war play a key role in weakening the economy, contributing to the dissolution of health systems in many countries. Elsewhere military spending – and specifically investment in nuclear weapons– is bolstered by the argument that a nuclear arsenal is a deterrent against aggressors. However, the underpinnings of deterrence are contestable; human beings may vary in "rational" behavior when responding to a perceived threat [vi]. For example, the US bombings in the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were intended to end World War II but also led to the devastation of Japan and untold damage to the environment and health. Today the acquisition of nuclear weapons constitutes a threat to which some may respond with violence, fueling a vicious cycle. In addition, investment in the military sector has long been touted as a means for stimulating economic growth and creating jobs. One example is the F-22 stealth fighter project in the United States, whose funding is expected to be cut shortly. This single program, whose budget request for 2008 was a whopping 4.6 billion dollars, was touted as a means of creating tens of thousands of jobs [vii, viii].

In 2007, 1,339 billion dollars (851 billion Euros) were spent globally on arms and other military expenditures, corresponding to 2.5% of the global gross domestic product [ix]. Surprisingly, the budget of the UN is only 1.5% of the arms expenditure in the world [x]. Although it costs less than \$1 to vaccinate a child against measles, complications from the disease killed 345,000 children in 2005 [xi]. As another example, Malaria contributes to over a million deaths in around hundred countries of the world each year, whereas the cost of malaria treatment in Africa is less than \$6 [xii]. Efforts to eradicate these common diseases are frustrated by lack of



investment in disseminating innovations to those most likely to benefit. For example, the vaccination program to eradicate cervical cancer is well beyond the resources of the average African country and yet those most likely to benefit in substantial numbers live in those countries. Meanwhile governments in both developing and developed countries channel resources towards the proliferation of weapons.

There is an urgent need to ban the production and spending associated with nuclear weapons as there is no remedy for the effects of nuclear weapons. A recent white paper authored by Ira Helfand of Physicians for Social Responsibility found that even a limited nuclear war with a fraction of a percent of the existent nuclear arsenal would lead to unprecedented, catastrophic climate change and so to global famine [<sup>xiii</sup>, <sup>xiv</sup>]. International Physicians for Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) is a medical organization that was established Post-Cold War in 1980. IPPNW won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1985 in recognition of pioneering work by American and Soviet physicians with support from 40 other countries, in the field of health, peace and development. The organization has been research active as well as created awareness about the catastrophic effects of war.

As future leaders, medical students carry the responsibility for strengthening the infrastructure of our health care system. Therefore, their role cannot be underestimated in improving global health. They must actively engage in the process of identifying and removing obstacles to achieving health for all. As part of the Students' Movement of IPPNW, medical students from more than 60 countries have pledged to support the call for disarmament in the interests of global health [<sup>xv</sup>]. IPPNW has numerous ongoing student projects that operate with the mission to provide quality health care to the people the world over. One such project is the Nuclear Weapons Inheritance Project. In this project, students organize delegations to countries that possess nuclear weapons and engage in discussions with the decision makers and local people to create increased awareness about the consequences of nuclear weapons. The project aims to influence medical student interest and encourage participation in nuclear disarmament discussions and activities. Since the project was begun in 2002, medical students have traveled to many countries including the United States, the United Kingdom, India, Pakistan, Russia, and many non-nuclear states. The Refugee Camp Project, or Recap, places approximately 30 local and international medical students in a refugee camp in Palestine, where they help refugees by providing them with social and medical support. The students hold health educational workshops especially for children



in the camps and do rotations at local clinics in order to observe the current health status in Palestine. IPPNW students also educate community members around the globe about the continuing threat of nuclear weapons via "Target X" and "Nuclear Weapons Free: My Cup of Tea" installations aimed towards increasing the profile of weapons in the public consciousness. Furthermore, "One Bullet Stories" and "Medical Voices Against Violence: Your Story" testimonials portray the human face of small arms violence; these resources are widely used for public and health professional education. Other projects include medical exchange programs for students, research at Stanford University on gun violence and handgun lobbying efforts in Philadelphia.

These active future physicians envisage a healthy future with security and prosperity. Undoubtedly, health is the ultimate priority and resources must be diverted to medicine and research in order to make healthcare affordable for all. Therefore, the medical community must insist on a safer environment and collaborate in the mission to provide the best possible care to their patients and aim for health for all.

## ***References***

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