

Medical ethics during war

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As the year's end, and the New Year of 2025 begins I have reflected upon the role of medics during any conflict and war. This year, we have yet again witnessed the death and injuries of thousands of innocent victims of the conflict, raging in different parts of the world like in Palestine, Lebanon, Sudan and Ukraine. Sadly, it is undeniable that mankind has been involved in conflict in one form or another for a long time. Although the first recorded large-scale war is believed to date back to 3100 BCE known as the Battle of Hamoukar,¹ skeletons with signs of trauma have been found in prehistoric burial sites like Jebel Sahaba dating back to 12000 BCE.² So conflict and war seem to be deeply embedded in human history.

At the same time, decent and moral people have set some ethical rules to dictate the moral framework that ideally should be operated during any conflict, to ensure that universal human values are maintained. It is, therefore, not surprising that there is congruity when it comes to the Ethics of war in all major religions of the world, as mentioned in the Holy texts like the Bhagavad Gita, Torah, Bible, and Quran.

The common themes emerging from these holy texts can be broadly divided into four headings. First and foremost War must be the last resort, fought for a just cause. In Gita the term used is Dharma Yuddha or righteous war.³ In Torah it should be for self-defence⁴ and in Quran, war is permitted for self-defense or to end oppression.⁵ Secondly, non-combatants must be spared and excessive violence is condemned. This is a consistent message across all Holy texts and religions. In one authentic hadith of the Holy Prophet Mohammed (pbh),⁶ it says Civilians, women, children and the elderly should not be harmed during war. Thirdly Respect for the environment and preservation of life are emphasized, for example in the Torah⁷ finally Human dignity, even in times of war is to be respected, including Respect for sacred places and treatment of prisoners of war with dignity. As time has elapsed, and with the lessons learned during the World Wars, these principles have been further refined and codified such as in the Convention of Human Rights.⁸

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The earliest codes of medical ethics during the war can also be traced to old civilizations including The Hippocratic Oath in 5th century BCE and states "I will maintain the utmost respect for Human life. I will not use my medical knowledge to violate human rights and civil liberties, even under threat". The ancient Indian Caraka Samhita in 1st century CE,⁹ Ancient Chinese Medical ethics (Han Dynasty 206 BCE-220 CE),¹⁰ The Jewish Talmudic teachings in 1-6th Century CE, and Islamic Medical ethics in 7th century CE¹¹ voice the same opinion. One of the common themes was that the Healers are expected to be impartial and to treat the individuals based on their needs rather than their affiliations. Their primary function has always been to preserve lives.

The recent horrific wars, especially in Israel, Palestine, and Lebanon, have given me an impetus to reflect on the topic of Medical Ethics during War and my role as a practicing Medical Professional. What we, as doctors are supposed to do during times of conflict, what are the obligations placed on us, and what needs to be done to consolidate these principles in our professional lives? Medical Ethics can be a very sensitive topic to navigate during any conflict or war. During the period of heightened emotions, it is an exercise of balancing various conflicting issues ranging from our cognitive biases to tribal and religious inclinations, to indoctrination due to propaganda, and balancing that with the duties placed on us from the regulatory bodies like the General Medical Council. This can easily lead to resentment and friction among colleagues with different ideologies and affiliations. It is worth, for us all, to remind ourselves of the core Ethical Principles. Like the principles of neutrality, beneficence (To act in the best interest of patients), non-maleficence (do not harm), autonomy, and justice. These principles are more relevant for medical practitioners working in the War zones and looking after injured patients. However, even doctors far away from the active war zones, still need to bear in mind the principles of, Neutrality and Justice when it comes to supporting one or the other warring factions. More important, is to do whatever is possible to save innocent lives, by promoting peace and protesting against the breaching of International law, which at the end of the day is the prime function of any medic.

Following the Nuremberg Trials, the Nuremberg Code

(Nuremberg Trials Project), reinforced the role of Ethics for Medical Professionals.¹² Similarly, The Geneva Conventions mandate respect for medical neutrality (ICRC Commentary), and this impartial care by Medical professionals has been further reinforced by The Declaration of Geneva by the World Medical Association. Unfortunately, there have been persistent breach of medical neutrality during conflict.¹³ Doctors working for NGOs like Medecins sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders) operate on strict neutrality and ethical Guidelines.

As a Doctor, I feel, we have a moral and Ethical duty to be just and fair in our assessments. Just as criticizing any Islamic country for breach of Human rights, should not be construed as being anti-Islam, similarly criticizing Israel for perpetrating genocide should not be taken as antisemitism. Especially, when the impartial International courts have called it genocide and plausible genocide. How can one justify killing thousands of children and women, destroying hospitals, restricting food and essential medicines, and the targetted killing of reporters and medics, all under the pretext of self-defence.¹⁴

We also at the same time need to acknowledge the fact, that no religion or sect within any religion is immune from being exploited and misused for personal and political gain to gain hegemony and dominate others. The irony is that even the so-called defenders of liberal values and freedom of speech have exploited the liberal ideals by being selective in their interpretation and implementation. The purpose of this article is not to point fingers at any one group, as we all are guilty of bias to some extent. When I read about the Israeli Human rights organization HaMoked claiming that it has evidence that the prominent Palestinian Orthopaedic surgeon Adnan Al-Bursh was beaten and assaulted before he died in Israel. It gave me hope that despite the pressure, brave people will still stand for the truth against their government.

Let us all including myself, do our introspection. I hope and wish to see all doctors in the UK and worldwide, uniting for a single cause of eliminating the ills of the individual and their respective societies. All doctors should stand for peace, fairness, justice, equality, and respect for human lives. I have a simple question to ask ourselves. Are we outraged at the injustice only, if perpetrated against the people we identify ourselves with, based on our colour, creed, country, race, ideology, or religion or do we get equally outraged at any injustice perpetrated against any human being irrespective of who he or she may be? If it is the former, we need to cleanse

ourselves from the cognitive biases we might have accrued due to indoctrination and our loyalties. Let us all reflect and try to rise above the politics of identity, and emulate the Universal Human values, as promoted in the age-old religious texts and the contemporary Geneva Convention. Let us all unite as one community of medics, fighting to preserve all Human lives, irrespective of which group the Human being belongs to. All lives matter.

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