then will medical research begin to influence clinical practice in a manner more suited to its undoubted potential value; clinicians will be able to integrate the information provided by medical research into their everyday clinical practice and be able to discuss such information with their patients.

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The tragedy of Yugoslavia

TWO American family physicians, concerned for the protection of human rights in the face of interpersonal and political violence, tested their assumption that physicians can be uniquely useful in the investigation of human rights abuses by joining a medical mission to the former Yugoslavia in 1993. The purpose of the mission as a whole was to investigate the effect of the war on children, the medical aspects of human rights abuses and the violations of medical neutrality. The visit lasted two weeks. One author went to Croatia, the other to Bosnia. They visited and observed refugee camps and hospitals, and interviewed refugee women and children and officials in governmental and non-governmental organizations.

They had direct experience of the daily shelling of the main hospital in Sarajevo and the great shortage of essential medical supplies. Indirect evidence confirmed serious psychological damage to a large number of refugee children, a suicide rate in adult refugees seven times the norm, physical torture and arbitrary shooting of groups of non-combatants.

The authors returned convinced that physicians have a special role, first because they are perceived as impartial and caring, thereby helping victims to report terrifying experiences; and secondly, because detailed medical histories and physical examination can provide the crucial link between alleged abuses and observed injuries. The special contribution of family physicians is, first, their flexibility that enables them to evaluate a wide range of situations in a short time in men, women or children; and secondly, their awareness of physical, psychological and social problems, all of which simultaneously afflict victims.

The moral obligation of physicians, as physicians, to investigate and protect human rights is discussed sensitively in this paper.

I found this article interesting in itself, but also for personal reasons. Two weeks before the Yugoslav civil war started, I addressed and enjoyed what will prove likely to have been the last medical conference attended by doctors from all seven parts of the former confederation. Eighty years before that, my wife's parents met for the first time as members of a Quaker ambulance serving in Serbia in the first world war. They witnessed events no less brutal than those described in this article and in all our newspapers.

JOHN HORDER

Past president of the Royal College of General Practitioners

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