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### Health professionals and the arms trade

Back in October I joined a group of health professionals in London to add our voice to the opposition to Defence and Security Equipment International (DSEI), one of the world’s largest showcases of military equipment hosted bi-annually by Britain.

Recently, another awful illustration of how innocent people suffer in a proxy conflict has developed. Many of the weapons being used by Turkey on the Syrian border have been supplied by the UK. In other words, we, as British taxpayers, are implicated in the horrific ordeal being endured by the victims of this conflict.

As climate change produces yet more drastic effects with desertification, flooding, and other major climatic changes leading to mass migration and increasing risks of conflict, the arms manufacturers see, not suffering, but profit making opportunities.

The American Journal *Annals of Internal Medicine* has called for a review of firearms regulation in the US.<sup>1</sup> No one is pretending that conflict, whether inter-personal, within societies, or between nations is solely related to the possession of weapons. However, widespread availability of lethal munitions markedly exacerbates the suffering caused by conflict.

There are around 40 000 gun-related deaths in the US each year and conflict linked to the widespread availability of firearms is seen as an ongoing public health issue.

DSEI promotes and extols increased destructive capability, from individual firearms and body armour, through to armoured vehicles, helicopters, missiles, and sophisticated weapons systems. It attracts private and state customers from around the world. Official invitations this year include a military delegation from Saudi Arabia, which is the UK’s largest customer of military equipment. This equipment, including Paveway IV laser-guided bombs from Raytheon in Glenrothes, has seen use over recent years in Yemen where conflict has led to the deaths of thousands of children and worrying outbreaks of cholera with the collapse of social and health infrastructure and the destruction of more than seventy health centres.

In many other countries in north Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, military spending

exceeds health budgets. Thus, in Pakistan, for instance, defence expenditure makes up 18% of the country’s total budget.

The countries that primarily profit from this situation are of course those that sell the most weapons. Five of the six largest arms exporters are the five permanent members of the UN Security Council — the five original nuclear weapons states. The British government appears to be proud of its role in this trade, and it was reported in July 2019 that the UK is once again the world’s second largest exporter of arms and weapons.<sup>2</sup>

Our role as doctors with a broad public health perspective is to call for a halt to this international arms trade and the widespread accumulation of military hardware, both legal and illegal.

There is a useful parallel with medical action against the tobacco industry. It was only when the medical establishment drew to public attention the devastating health effects of smoking that the power of the tobacco lobby began to be curtailed. We believe that, in the same way, health professionals have a responsibility to speak out against the arms industry.

Coordinated by public health organisation Medact, 276 health professionals have written to the UK Secretary of State for International Trade this month, demanding that the UK government commits to ending its support of the arms industry and arms fairs, and clearly states that health and wellbeing should always take priority over arms trade profit.

What else can individuals do? Examine our pension funds and investments and make sure that, inadvertently, we are not funding the arms trade or weapons of mass destruction. Don’t Bank on the Bomb Scotland has produced a comprehensive report detailing which banks and financial institutions should be most avoided.<sup>3</sup> As doctors, we no longer invest in the tobacco industry, let’s divest from the arms industry.

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