

Scientific journals should not engage themselves in political polling

The urge of the BMJ editors and editorial staff to engage in political matters, expressed in their recent preoccupation with the proposed academic boycott against Israel, is simply unexplainable.

For several years the BMJ has gradually changed its role from being one of the foremost medical journals, one which publicized clinical trials and studies in the fields of medical and life sciences, to one which deals with matters entirely outside the purview of a respected scientific journal, and even those matters are not treated equally.

For example, there was no critical self-searching in the BMJ that I can recall during the period of extremist violence in Ireland or any condemnation of the inhumane treatment carried out by certain British soldiers against Iraqi civilians.

Since one can assume that the academic institutions in Britain such as Oxford, Cambridge and others did not bear responsibility for what was happening in the political arena, including blatant violations of human rights, the question of whether to impose upon them an academic boycott simply did not arise.

Consequently, this continued fixation with human rights in the Israeli-Palestinian realm is puzzling at best, and makes one wonder why we have merited such singular treatment when there is no lack of places in the world where human rights are trampled, to the point of genocide. For some reason, the voice of the BMJ is silent regarding the atrocities in Darfur and Sudan, the murder of millions in Congo, the carnage in other countries and the unabashed breaches of human rights in China, where organs are removed from prisoners awaiting execution, not to mention the treatment of the Falun Gong. Yet the BMJ has not seen fit to debate

the wisdom of a boycott of Chinese academic institutions, nor have they made it the topic of an opinion poll.

And rightly so: just as the idea of a boycott of Israeli academic institutions is foolish, pointless and punishes exactly those who are most active in providing help to people in need, so, too, a boycott of Chinese academic institutions would serve no purpose.

Therefore, one must unequivocally protest this attempt on the part of the BMJ to deal with political issues, particularly the complex, long standing conflict in the Middle East. As an example of such complexity one can consider the recent proposal of Qatar, a member of the UN Security Council, regarding the serious humanitarian situation in Gaza. This proposal was blocked by none other than the Palestinian delegation, in an apparently censurable attempt to defend and excuse the Hamas, whose leaders have aggravated an already difficult situation. Such action is worthy of condemnation by everyone, including those British academics who are so quick to delegitimize Israel, since the actions of these Palestinian representatives blocked the discussion of a serious humanitarian topic in an international forum.

If British academicians and doctors wish to help the suffering and downtrodden, they would do well to stop dealing with harmful, counter-productive opinion polls on academic boycotts of Israel and begin to channel their energy toward easing the suffering in Gaza.

The BMJ, too, should forego dabbling in politics, and return to being a valued and respected medical journal, in keeping with its distinguished tradition. ■

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The American Medical Association rejected the call of British doctors to boycott the Israeli Medical Association

July 2007: The American Medical Association (AMA) rejected the call of British doctors to boycott the Israeli Medical Association (IMA)

The AMA, the representative organization of doctors in the United States, rejected the call of 130 British doctors to boycott the IMA and to expel it from the World Medical Association. The call was issued based on the argument that the IMA acts as the executive arm of the Government of Israel in all matters relating to the government's policy towards the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, and does not apply moral standards concerning the health needs of the civilian population in these territories.

The AMA passed a decision at its annual meeting stating that the IMA is an apolitical organization whose purpose is

to promote health and medical issues. The AMA decision goes on to state that the IMA has acted on numerous occasions to ensure the provision of health services to the Palestinian population, has intervened on behalf of Palestinian patients slated to be evicted from hospitals in Israel due to lack of funding, and also helped Palestinian medical students who encountered difficulties passing through border control points. These interventions have included petitions to the High Court of Justice in Israel.

It should be noted that the AMA decision is of significant importance as the organization is one of the most influential members of the World Medical Association.