



## A Physicians' Peace Organization

"Okka, why, actually, are you here with me now? What's the story behind this?" Okka, brown curls gleaming in the sunshine on my porch, paused, in her thoughtful way. She is a fifth year medical student in Berlin, and has come to work with me as part of a program called "Practice and Engage" run by the German affiliate of the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW). Students are expected to practice clinical skills in the specialty of their mentor, and to engage in some kind of peace work, broadly defined.

"How far back do you want me to start?"

"Ah, you could start from when you were two," I smiled. Okka's father is a psychoanalyst.

"Well, I grew up knowing my father was a member of IPPNW, and as a young person, I was interested in their policies of peace. I was attracted to the idea of combining concrete experience of patients and their illnesses with working on the social and political structures that determine health – a holistic way of approaching health."

So far, Okka has worked on issues of refugee health and rights of asylum, and also, in 2003, on advocacy against the war in Iraq, with arguments based on projections of health effects on the Iraqi population.

These, indeed, are the kind of issues health workers in IPPNW engage in.

The organization was founded in 1980, at the height of the Cold War, by a small group of US and Soviet physicians, led by cardiologists Bernard Lown of the US and Evgeny Chazov of the Soviet Union. Their reasoning was thus:

- No matter how many lives we save through our medical advances, nuclear war could kill millions in minutes.
- The issue of nuclear weapons is not merely a military or political one; it is a health issue. As health professionals we will attempt to abolish nuclear weapons.
- This issue transcends the political divisions between our countries and blocks and calls for concerted action.

IPPNW was formed as "a non-partisan global federation of medical organizations dedicated to research, education, and advocacy relevant to the prevention of nuclear war. To this end," its mission statement continues, "IPPNW seeks to prevent all wars, to

promote non-violent conflict resolution, and to minimize the effects of war and preparations for war on health, development, and the environment."

After its foundation, the organization went on to galvanize tens of thousands of health workers in dozens of countries. IPPNW won the Nobel Peace Prize for this work in 1985. After the Cold War ended, many people imagined that the threat of use of nuclear weapons had ended with it. IPPNW has continued to insist that the 30,000 nuclear bombs remaining in the world, several thousand on high-alert firing status, continue to present a grave and massive threat to human health and life, whether in accidental or deliberate government use, or terrorist acquisition. Physicians in the organization have persistently formed delegations to talk with decision-makers on the issue, informed their colleagues by publishing in medical journals on topic of the health effects of nuclear weapons and their manufacture, and mobilized public opinion with actions like demonstrations and articles in the popular press. Current activism is directed to the US development of new nuclear weapons; US policy threatening the collapse of the Nonproliferation Treaty; the particular risks posed by Israeli, Indian, and Pakistani nuclear weapons; and the need to move away from the dangerous "launch-on-warning" policy by the US and Russia, among other issues.

IPPNW, as a global organization, having developed strategies of activism around the issues of nuclear weapons, then adapted these strategies to the more recent work aimed at banning landmines, and the small arms that are responsible for most of the actual killing. In each case, physicians present a health perspective on the issue.

There are several dozen national affiliates of IPPNW, with physician activists on every continent, often, as in Germany, with associated student organizations. These affiliates frequently address a broader and more locally relevant set of issues, alongside the nuclear weapons issues (1,2). Some affiliates focus not only on the health effects of direct violence but also on the harmful health effects of certain political and social structures. There was a major advocacy effort around economic sanctions against Iraq, in place until recently. In the last month, IPPNW medical students have begun a project aimed at informing the students at first hand on the health problems facing Palestinians in the occupied territories.

It is difficult to judge the efficacy of such work. Frequently IPPNW represents the health sciences perspective in a campaign, for example, against landmines, alongside an array of other civil society actors. Success, which was achieved in this particular campaign, is exhilarating, but cannot be attributed solely to IPPNW's work. Former president of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, said publicly that he was influenced by IPPNW in his own attempts to rid the world of nuclear weapons.

This physicians' organization exemplifies some of the ways in which initiatives from the health sector can attempt to influence issues of peace. In particular, its processes are redefinition of a "political" issue as a health issue, dissemination of facts on the health impact of militarism, establishment of superordinate goals across conflict divides, and advocacy with decision-makers and the public. It has, from the beginning, taken a preventive role. Thinkers within the organization try to push further toward the preventive implications of understanding the "root causes" of political violence.

In September, 2004, the organization held one of its biennial congresses in Beijing, China. [NB omit comma after congresses] Speakers were faithful to the organization's core mission of seeking to abolish nu-

clear weapons, with a particular focus on the nuclear crisis in the Korean Peninsula. Issues of nuclear terrorism and nuclear accident were discussed, as well as the issue of health effects of globalization, a major preoccupation of physicians of poor countries. There were also sessions on the work of health professionals in conflicts in the Middle East, Africa, South Asia and Iraq. There were sessions on using the "peace through health" framework as a tool to enthuse more physicians and health sciences students. The difficult topic of evaluation of peace work was raised.

As IPPNW refreshes its energy and renews its ideas, Okka and the thousands of medical students around the globe working with IPPNW will have an array of fascinating and important tasks ahead of them, working alongside a cohort of deeply committed physicians.

### Reference

- 1 Rezaković D. Why the organization "Croatian Physicians for Peace"? *Croat Med J.* 1993;34:174-84.
- 2 Gottstein U. International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) delegate visit to the hospitals in Split, West Mostar and East Mostar, November 29 – December 6, 1993. *Croat Med J.* 1994;35:55-56