High-impact medical journals and peace: a history of involvement

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Political engagement of medical journals?

"(medical journal) editors should not only have a political role but should also speak up for citizens" (Kleinert & Horton, 2000)

or

"(medical journals appear as) bully pulpits from which unrepresentative people, the editors, can hold forth and claim to be speaking on behalf on the entire human race, when they do not even represent doctors" (Daniels, 2003)

???

Political issues covered by medical journals:

- Abortion, stem cell research, tobacco regulation, research ethics, Medicare (US), National Health Service (UK)...
- War, political repression, terrorism, human rights abuses

"War constantly throws up moral questions." (R. Smith, BMJ)

"Nothing touches nerves faster than our forays into the public health consequences of conflict." (T. Delamothe, BMJ)

Initiatives against nuclear weapons

1951. *Lancet*: "Prospect of War" by Richard Doll and colleagues:

"We ask (our fellow doctors) to join us... to halt preparation for war and to bring about a new and determined approach to the peaceful settlement of disputes and to world disarmament."

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1951. Medical Association for the Prevention of War (MAPW)

1961. Physicians for Social Responsibility (PSR) ⟶ 1962. *NEJM* articles

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1980 International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW)

- Majority of contributions in *Lancet*, but also in *JAMA* and *BMJ*
- 1992-2002 *Medicine and Global Survival* (with BMJ Publishing Group)

Broadening the scope

Since 1983. – *JAMA* annual theme issue in commemoration of Hiroshima

- Prevention of nuclear war, effects of radiation
- Violence and human rights in general

1990s and 2000s:

- stances against landmines (*Lancet, BMJ, Annals*), cluster bombs (*Lancet*)
- Iraq war (*Lancet* – controversial mortality studies in 2004 and 2006)

Journal	Lancet	JAMA	BMJ	NEJM	Annals
Articles with MeSH term "Iraq" (since 1991)	124	54	55	29	8
Articles with MeSH term "terrorism" (since 2001)	105	110	74	61	16

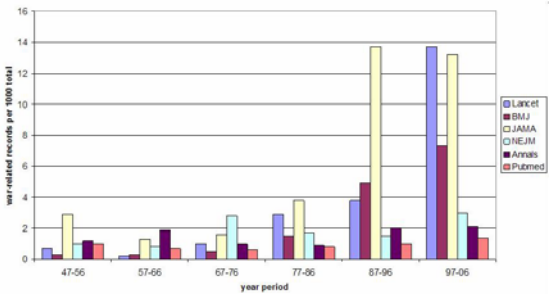
- developing Peace through Health concept (*Lancet, BMJ*)

Trends in coverage of war- and peace-related issues

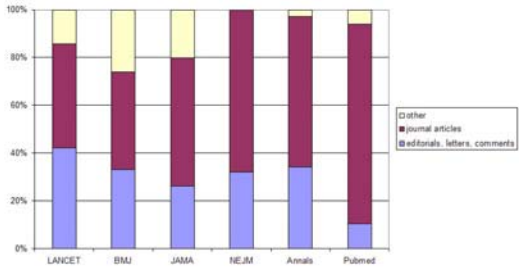
"Since 1975, medical journals have steadily devoted increased numbers of their pages to topics related to human rights, which included the effects of war and civil conflict and other social determinants of health"

(A. Flanagin, 2001)

The proportion of war-related articles (identified using "War" as the MeSH Major Topic in PubMed database) in the total number of published articles during the last 60 years.



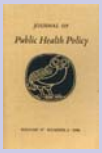
Breakdown by the type of war-related articles.



Actions that high-impact medical journals can take to support peace and peace-building (1):

- Solicit and publish articles that objectively and neutrally document health professionals' experiences in war affected environments, address discrimination, support human rights, endeavor to build peace and foster reconciliation;
- Solicit and publish evidence-based articles that objectively and neutrally discuss the consequences of war including casualties, physical and psychological trauma, displacement, war crimes and the impact of conflicts on public health
- Use editorials to clearly articulate positions taken by journals and/or their editors on peace matters;
- Draw attention to peace and health related issues by setting aside space for regular columns on these subjects or by publishing special editions of journals;

Actions that high-impact medical journals can take to support peace and peace-building (2):

- Avoid allowing bias in favor of one party in a conflict to factor into the selection of commentaries and letters for publication;
- Encourage and publish collaborative papers from authors across battle lines;
- Be supportive of journals from conflict regions and encourage their interest in documenting their experiences in war and post-war recovery and reconciliation;
- Moderate online forums to prevent offensive, inflammatory and inaccurate information being circulated that could contribute to tensions;
- Endorse and sponsor interlinked peace and health education, trainings, conferences and other events.

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