

A charter for medical neutrality



Prof Eoin O'Brien, Professor of Molecular Pharmacology at the Conway Institute, UCD, examines the need for a Charter to support doctors in humanitarian crises, in light of the treatment of imprisoned medics in Bahrain



Speaking at the Bahraini Ministry of Health in 2011 were: (l-r) Andrew Anderson, Deputy Director, Front Line; Senator Averil Power; Prof Damian McCormack Mch, FRCS Orth; Prof Eoin O'Brien Dsc, MD, FRCP(Lond), FRCP(Edin); David Andrews, former Minister for Foreign Affairs; and Marian Harkin, MEP

Prof Damian McCormack wrote a letter to *The Irish Times* in May 2011 in which he made an impassioned plea for support for doctors imprisoned in Bahrain, some of whom he had trained in Dublin. [1] Many of these doctors who were arrested, imprisoned, tortured and sentenced to long jail sentences by a dysfunctional legal system are still in prison and those who have been released are threatened with having their right to practise medicine removed by the Bahraini authorities. [2]

I could not have anticipated then that this letter would lead me to visit government officials and the families of imprisoned doctors in Bahrain [3]; I could not have anticipated either that my efforts to support colleagues being maltreated in a distant island would draw me into polemical conflict with my former alma mater, the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI) and that I would resign my fellowship of the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland (RCPI) in protest against its role in Bahrain. [4]

These events have led me to determine how the Royal Colleges in the UK might differ from their sister Colleges in Ireland, and to make a proposal for the Royal Colleges in both countries to construct a charter for the future protection of medical neutrality.

Irish Royal Colleges and Bahrain

The relationship of the Irish Colleges with Bahrain, which extends back many years, took on a new dimension when the RCSI invested almost €100 million to develop the RCSI-Medical University of Bahrain, which opened in 2009. In June

2011, shortly after the Arab Spring rising in Bahrain and the imprisonment of doctors, the RCSI and RCPI conferred joint degrees on the graduates from RCSI-Bahrain and the failure of either College's president to visit the families of the imprisoned doctors drew strong protest from the medical profession in Ireland and elsewhere.

The Colleges, which stood apart from international human rights organisations in condemning the Bahraini authorities, were criticised by the *Lancet* and the *BMJ*, with the latter accusing RCSI-Bahrain of complicity with the regime. [5]

Subsequently, the RCSI has acknowledged that its "actions were unacceptable and should never have happened". [6] But such platitudinous statements have done little for the doctors in prison or on trial.

UK Royal Colleges and Bahrain

In October 2012, I wrote to the presidents of the Royal College of Physicians in London (RCP) and the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh (RCP Edin) in my role as a fellow of both institutions, suggesting that they might influence the fate of the imprisoned doctors "by writing to the King requesting a pardon so that these doctors may return to doing what they did so well for many years, namely caring of ill people".

Dr Neil Dewhurst, President of RCP Edinburgh, replied immediately, stating that in response to my letter he had written again to the Bahrain ambassador "expressing our continuing concern about the plight of doctors who may be imprisoned in Bahrain as a result of discharging their professional and moral responsi-

bilities to treat sick and injured patients in the hope that a royal pardon may be forthcoming".

Sir Richard Thompson, President of the RCP, replied saying that the College had written twice before and that it would discuss the issue further. However, when I had not had a response after two months, I wrote expressing my concern at the continuing sentencing of doctors and added that if I did not receive a supportive response I would have to consider this as a resignation issue.

This elicited a very stern rebuke: "I feel affronted that you choose to try to influence us by threats! Not what I expect from our Fellows."

I replied that what he expected from the College's fellows was at variance with what I, as a fellow, expected from the College. I added that I had visited the doctors and

their families in Bahrain and that I was aware of the suffering of these doctors, and that every day that passes is one of acute suffering for them. I also pointed out that his reaction to my threatened resignation failed to take consideration of the fact that my fellowship had been hard-earned, and that to resign it would be a very difficult decision for me, as was the case with my resignation from the RCPI, and that I was acting in the interest of fellow doctors who had been deserted by the establishment bodies of the medical profession.

I did not receive a reply and I wrote again stating that I was preparing an article for publication and that wishing to be fair to all the Colleges I would appreciate knowing the College's reaction. I also reiterated that I was "giving careful consideration to my resignation as a Fellow and I would ask you not to accuse me of threatening behaviour in this regard, as you have done previously – it is for me a matter of principle."

Sir Richard replied after a meeting of the Senior Fellows to say that "in summary, the RCP has clearly pointed out to the Bahrain authorities that the healthcare workers were apparently only caring for patients, whatever the activities of them, on an humanitarian basis, and as such should not be penalised, let alone punished and imprisoned".

So much for the responses from the Royal Colleges in the UK of which I am a fellow. In writing to Prof Norman Williams, President of the RCS, I could only appeal to him as a concerned physician. He replied immediately to my letter as follows: "We share your very

real concerns that these doctors have been arrested and detained in circumstances which circumvent both their medical oath and their basic human rights. I am grateful that you have taken the time to update the College on the worrying state of affairs for these doctors, and have used this information – as well as the articles that you drew to my attention – to inform a recent letter to King Hamad of Bahrain. In this letter we have strongly called for the immediate release of these doctors, explaining once again that they have an ethical duty to medically care for those in need regardless of their race, colour, creed and political affiliation. Thank you again for your correspondence and please do stay in touch on the issue, and anyway in which we can further the defence of these individuals."

This unequivocal response is deserving of comment for two reasons. First, it shows a very genuine concern for the imprisoned doctors and a willingness to act by appealing directly to the King of Bahrain. Second and importantly, Prof Williams's response contrasts strongly with the attitude of the RCSI, which has refused to use its considerable influence to put pressure on the King to pardon the imprisoned doctors.

Charter for medical neutrality

In conclusion, I have demonstrated differing nuances of attitude among five Royal Colleges in the UK and Ireland in voicing support for doctors caught up in the turmoil of political disorder. Is it not timely for the Colleges of both countries, which carry such collective influence internationally, to draw up a common charter on medical neutrality that could be initiated as soon as doctors are threatened in the pursuit of doing their duty to care for the sick and injured?

Regrettably, in a world that shows little sign of learning from the humanitarian tragedies of the past, it may be anticipated that a positive instrument for protecting medical neutrality will be much needed in the future.

References:

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'Prof Norman Williams's [President of the RCS] response contrasts strongly with the attitude of the RCSI'