

The effects of armed conflict on children – should we remain silent?

The invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces with its consequent massive destruction of residential areas, horrendous displacement of civilians, mainly the elderly, infirm and women and children, and the recent shelling and destruction of paediatric and maternity wards at a hospital in the southern city of Mariupol have highlighted the unacceptable consequences of armed conflict on the vulnerable sectors of a population. For health care practitioners in general and paediatricians and child care specialists in particular, can we continue as a profession to remain silent about these atrocities? Should we not be condemning them in the harshest of terms and should we not be isolating the nations who are performing these acts of barbarism, just as the academic boycott did during the apartheid years?

Being situated at the southern end of Africa, one could perhaps argue that an European war is not our problem. Africa has had numerous recent conflicts with huge refugee crises and displacement of populations, hunger and starvation, the systematic violation of women and children, and the use of child soldiers, when we have remained largely silent. The ongoing violence and attempted subjugation of Palestine has produced a limited response from health professionals in general. So what makes the war in Ukraine different? Very little! All conflicts target vulnerable civilians, in particular women and children and we should make our voices heard condemning all these actions. What the Ukraine invasion has highlighted is the power of western TV and social media in providing 24 hour coverage and focusing our attention on what

is happening in that conflict. If the same attention were given to conflicts occurring in other parts of the world, perhaps we could change the general complacency and lack of involvement.

At the beginning of this month, the Department of Science and Innovation instructed its entities from engaging “in any action of any kind, which could be construed as a political commentary or political reaction to the developments in Ukraine”.^[1] We believe this response is inappropriate. Child Health professionals should not remain silent. We believe that the community of paediatricians needs to consider ways of showing its disapproval of the invasion of Ukraine and its effect on the Ukrainian population, as a start to becoming more vocal on the effects of conflict on the psychological and physical health and wellbeing in many other parts of the world. We would like to applaud the recent stance taken by the International Child Neurology Association on calling for an end to violence against children.^[2]

John M Pettifor FCPaed(SA); PhD(Med)

Editor

1. Linda Nordling. Don't comment on Ukraine, South African science bodies told. Research Professional News 3 March 2022 <https://www.researchprofessionalnews.com/rr-news-africa-south-2022-3-don-t-comment-on-ukraine-south-african-science-bodies-told/> (accessed 10 March 2022.)
2. The International Child Neurology Association. Stop the War of Children. <https://www.ICNApedia.org> (accessed 16 March 2022.)