The possibilities for the health sector to actively contribute to peace processes

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The 20th century has been the bloodiest in the history of mankind. Two world wars and numerous smaller violent conflicts have resulted in more than 200 million deaths, 50 million displaced and the suffering of countless more. The World Bank and WHO estimate that war will be the 8th most common cause of morbidity and mortality in the year 2020 [1]. Despite the enormous human consequences of violent conflict, it is a relatively new thought that physicians and other health professionals can play an active role in prevention, resolution and reconciliation after violent conflicts. Since Henri Dunant in the 19th century founded the International Red Cross, health professionals have treated combatants and civilians in situations of violent conflict. Meanwhile health professionals have been engaged in peace work, but only as individuals and not as professionals. This changed in the last half of the 20th century when organizations such as International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) and Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) were founded with the purpose of preventing war, the use of weapons and human rights abuses, because of their grave consequences for human health. The association between violent conflict and health was further stressed in 1981 when the World Health Assembly passed a resolution that acknowledged the role of physicians and other health workers in the preservation and promotion of peace as the most important factor for the attainment of health for all [2]. In an article from 2000 a “health-peace initiative” is defined as any initiative that is intended to improve the health of a population and to simultaneously heighten that population’s level of peace and security [3]. The purpose of this article is to give an overview of the growing academic field, concerning the contribution of health professionals to peace processes and war prevention.

THE CHARACTERISTICS AND HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

The values of the medical profession give health professionals a unique possibility to contribute to peace processes. The medical profession is associated with characteristics such as altruism, solidarity and credibility and with humanitarian values such as neutrality and impartiality. Also health workers have a wider access to the civilian population during violent conflict than most other professions [4]. These conditions give the medical profession a significant influence. On the other hand, health professionals are an integrated part of the local community and it can therefore be difficult for individuals to stay neutral under some circumstances.

THE ROLE OF HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

The epidemiological, clinical and public health knowledge that health professionals possess due to their training can be of great value in medical peace work. The medical terminology has often inspired the development of weapons throughout history. Therefore an instance health systems can contribute to civic identity and human security, which has been used in the reconstruction of post-conflict societies [6, 10]. Treatment after physical and psychological trauma is important for social rehabilitation of the community as well as for health. It has been suggested that health systems can contribute to rehabilitation by giving people a common identity, by being convey-
ors of trust and by meeting basic human needs. It is presumed that the population in a community with a common identity and where basic needs are being met equally is less susceptible to competing identity claims such as religion or ethnicity and the resulting fragmentation and destabilization of society [6]. WHO has throughout the 1990s coordinated projects in Mozambique, Croatia and Bosnia amongst other places, where all the parties to a violent conflict prioritize and plan health services in the local community together during the rehabilitation phase [10]. Treatment and rehabilitation of victims of trauma combined with reconciliation strengthens the peace after a violent conflict [6]. University and NGO-projects in Croatia, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka have taken advantage of that.

A NEW ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE?
The ideas presented in this article are based on the field work of numerous organizations, the projects and trainings of health professionals undertaken by WHO and research by academics in North American and European universities. The discipline has been called Peace through Health, Health as a Bridge for Peace and Medical Peace Work. Despite a continuing academic discussion about the theories and a large future task to evaluate and validate the field efforts, the thought that health professionals can contribute actively to peace work is gaining increasing recognition. A number of articles have been published on the topic in renowned international journals, the first university courses have been implemented in Canada and Norway and twelve European partners financed by the European Union are developing the world’s first internet based university course in Medical Peace Work. The basis for an international network of academics, teachers and field workers have been made and three scientific conferences have taken place in Finland and Canada in 2001 and 2005 as well as a number of smaller meetings hosted by the UN, NGOs and universities with the purpose of building community and establishing common ground. Currently an international homepage is being developed as well as training material and a book summarizing the academic knowledge on the topic and a new open-access scientific journal on war and health has been inaugurated.

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References