

Doctor's group aims to divorce politics from medicine

By SHERI SHEFA, Staff Reporter

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TORONTO — Dr. Stephen Samuel, the chair of Doctors Against Racism and Anti-Semitism (DARA), said that the attempted ban of Israeli doctors from a breast cancer conference in Egypt last week “is a typical example of political interference in medicine and science.”

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Dr. Stephen Samuel

The conference, held in Alexandria, Egypt, from Oct. 21 to 27, and organized by the Susan G. Komen for the Cure, a breast cancer advocacy group, took a controversial turn when the Egyptian health minister, Hatem el-Gabali, sent a notice to invited Israeli doctors that they would not be granted access.

After Jewish advocacy groups, including the Anti-Defamation League, urged the Susan G. Komen foundation to insist that Israeli doctors be allowed to attend, the foundation released a statement that said: “We launched a diplomatic effort to ensure they would be able to participate. I am pleased to report that our efforts led to confirmation that all advocates would be welcome to participate in the events.”

DARA, a Toronto-based grassroots non-profit organization that seeks “objectivity and freedom from intimidation in science, medical journalism and academia,” released a statement that said that the attempted exclusion of Israeli doctors from the conference in Egypt is proof that for some, the “pursuit of medical and scientific truths... is secondary to their discriminatory and xenophobic sentiments.”

Samuel said it is these kinds of incidents that has led to the founding of DARA, which held its first conference, called “The Medical and Psychological Impact of Terrorism,” at the University of Toronto on Oct. 18.

More than 150 people attended the conference that included addresses by Dr. Frank Sommers, a Canadian psychiatrist and Nobel laureate, Dr. Fuad Khan, a Harvard-based psychiatrist and Dr. Eran Regev, a maxillofacial surgeon from Israel who has treated terror victims.

Samuel said the conference in Toronto and the group’s mandate in general is meant to raise awareness, “to pursue truth and to divorce politics from medicine and science and to struggle against intimidation, extremism and distortion of truth in academia.

“Until not long ago, we assumed in medicine that the influence in politics and conflicts and so forth will not result in editors allowing their journals to be used for political purposes and thereby allow distorted publications,” he added.

But recently, anti-Israel articles have appeared in medical journals such as the Lancet and the British Medical Journal.

This year, the Canadian Medical Association Journal (CMAJ) ran two pieces that were critical of Israel’s role in the recent war with Gaza.

Samuel said that DARA’s mission is academic in its approach, and that it doesn’t focus solely on anti-Jewish

and anti-Israel issues.

“We are professionals and we are not a political organization, we are not another Jewish advocacy group. We have members who are non-Jews, members who are Bahais, who are Hindus, who are Catholics. Two of the seven speakers [at the conference] were Muslims,” he said, adding that the topics focused on the physical and psychological consequences of terrorism all over the world.

Samuel said that unfortunately, politics and propaganda often find their way into medical and academic conferences.

He recalled attending a lecture held at U of T in May called “Medicine, War and Occupation: The Case of Gaza.”

Samuel said one of the speakers, Dr. Ghada Karmi, presented false statistics to argue that the occupation by Israel of Gaza and the West Bank has resulted in the deterioration of the health care of Palestinians.

“I had done my research before I went to this conference and got the statistics the night before from UNICEF and the World Health Organization on the infant mortality rates and on the age and sex standardized mortality rates per 100,000 people, which is a measure of health standards, in Israel and all of the Arab countries and in the West Bank and Gaza,” Samuel said.

“She gave numbers of infant mortality rates, which were lies. So when I pointed out to the room that I had the real statistics and I asked her why she distorted them, I was immediately attacked as a racist.”

This, Samuel said, is exactly the kind of thing DARA is fighting against – and not only when it comes to Israel.

“If we see that there is discrimination being practised that is related to medical care in Afghanistan, that women are not allowed to be doctors, or that women are being denied health care because they are not allowed to be outside without a man accompanying them, as is the case in Saudi Arabia... We will comment on it.”

He added that he hopes DARA will motivate other professional groups to organize themselves in a similar fashion.

“If we can get lawyers against racism and anti-Semitism, teachers, accountants – various professional groups – the government and the media will listen.”

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