

Doctors group fights anti-Jewish bias

By PAUL LUNGEN, Staff Reporter

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TORONTO — It was a question physician-activist Michael Bloom had clearly anticipated: does the world really need yet another organization dedicated to protecting Jews from the scourge of anti-Semitism?

Rob Zadik, left, and Michael Bloom

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Bloom, along with his colleague and friend Rob Zadik, had only a month or two ago created DARA, Doctors Against Racism & Anti-Semitism, a largely Jewish group that seemed to duplicate the efforts of long-established Jewish organizations in the field of community protection.

“Anti-Semitism is such a big problem,” explained Bloom, “you need a multipronged approach.” The work of existing organizations is “necessary, but not sufficient.”

Where DARA steps in is in asking its members – doctors, dentists, medical students, academics – to use their skills, their contacts and their relationships to try to put out the fire of anti-Semitism in their own backyard.

Bloom and Zadik believe that in recent years, there has been a frightening upsurge in overt anti-Semitism worldwide, including in Canada, “where anti-Semitism is becoming fashionable in the form of anti-Zionism.”

What’s more, they believe that it is beginning to make inroads within their profession – at least if measured by instances in medical literature.

The Lancet and the British Medical Journal have been politicized against Israel for some time and both have carried anti-Israel articles, Bloom said.

And a couple of months ago, the Canadian Medical Association Journal (CMAJ) ran two pieces “on the effects of Israeli aggression on the health of Palestinians in Gaza,” he added.

Bloom and Zadik see those articles as providing the impetus that led to the formation of DARA. Co-operating with Honest Reporting Canada, a media watchdog group, they distributed a talking-points memo to friends in the medical profession which addressed the allegations in the CMAJ articles.

“We sent it to doctors we knew,” Bloom said.

In the end, more than 200 people wrote letters of complaint to the magazine. Among them was one missive jointly signed by 50 doctors. That prompted the journal editor to contact a representative of the 50 and they spent an hour on the phone discussing concerns about the articles.

Bloom and Zadik believe the CMAJ is now more sensitive to the issues raised by the articles.

“We don’t want the CMAJ to go the way of the British journals, which are virulent in tone,” Zadik said.

Impressed with the grassroots response to the CMAJ articles, Bloom and Zadik sent out another letter to hundreds of doctors, inviting them to an information session to discuss possible future activities. More than

50 showed up, and another 50 would have also come, but for scheduling conflicts. In the past few months, DARA's membership has grown to 238 members who work in a variety of medical disciplines and span a wide range of ages, including retired physicians.

The group's first organized activity took place April 6 when about 30 people braved "a hostile" environment at the University of Toronto to attend a lecture by Jewish and Arab doctors on health issues in Gaza. "It was an anti-Israel propaganda fest under the guise of medicine," Zadik said.

"During the question period, we challenged the propaganda and showed they were not able to talk with impunity, they'd be challenged," said Bloom.

Questioners brought up the use by Hamas of human shields, that ambulances were used to shuttle weapons, that Hamas attacked Israel from the vicinity of hospitals and that Hamas operatives hid from Israeli forces in hospitals.

Bloom believes the lecture played to DARA's strength – organizing on a grassroots basis to confront anti-Israel attacks.

DARA serves as "a wake up call to doctors" about the re-emergence of anti-Semitism as "a huge problem." It also is meant to "galvanize doctors to stop being apathetic and to use our skills, connections and credibility to help combat this problem," said Bloom.

With its monthly meetings, it "provides an organized forum to help doctors mount a co-ordinated response," he added.

Bloom and Zadik both have a background that included political advocacy. A native of Toronto, Bloom attended Associated Hebrew Schools and the Community Hebrew Academy of Toronto. As an undergraduate at the University of Western Ontario, he became politically active in the Jewish Students Union at a time when anti-Israel agitation was beginning to develop momentum.

His time for political activism shrank considerably when he entered medical school. He now works as an anesthesiologist at William Osler Health Center.

Zadik attended Jewish school in his native Calgary. He served as president of Hillel at the University of Calgary before moving to London to study medicine at Western. He works as an anesthesiologist at Humber River Regional Hospital.

They admit they'd rather be focusing on their careers and families, but they believe doctors on an individual basis can make a difference. "We're not looking for recognition or self-promotion," Bloom said. "All I'm trying to do is help the communal response to anti-Semitism run more smoothly and effectively."

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