

# Doctors target anti-Israel bias in medical literature

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A sense of urgency permeated the Doctors Against Racism and Anti-Semitism's (DARA) annual general meeting earlier this month, with discussion centring on the need to combat anti-Israel bias in the realm of medical literature, and specifically in the prominent weekly medical journal the *Lancet*.

The meeting, initially scheduled for October, was hastened by the *Lancet*'s publishing what DARA, a Toronto-based grassroots organization of health-care professionals that formed in 2009 and has about 750 international members, considered an extremely biased "Open letter for the people in Gaza."

Printed July 23 in the *Lancet*, the letter was penned by five European doctors and has, according to the journal's website, garnered more than 20,000 signatures.

Part of it reads: "On the basis of our ethics and practice, we are denouncing what we witness in the aggression of Gaza by Israel. We ask our colleagues, old and young professionals, to denounce this Israeli aggression. We challenge the perversity of a propaganda that justifies the creation of an emergency to masquerade a massacre, a so-called 'defensive aggression.'"

DARA co-founder Frank Sommers, a psychiatrist in the University of Toronto's faculty of medicine, called the letter "inflammatory," arguing that "a journal that provides the medical community worldwide ostensibly with evidence-based scientific advances should not utilize its reputation and give voice in its pages to one-sided, politically motivated information whose impact is to inflame anti-Israel and anti-Jewish feelings. There's enough of that already in this world."

Sommers was one of several DARA executive members to address the crowd of about 50 people – predominantly DARA members, though the talk was open to the public – who gathered Sept. 10 at Adath Israel Congregation. The speakers traced the recent history of what they believe is anti-Israel sentiment in the medical sphere and dissected the views of *Lancet* editor Richard Horton.

Toronto anesthesiologist Robert Zadik outlined how anti-Israel content in medical literature began to crop up after the 2001 UN World Conference Against Racism in Durban, South Africa, when a number of NGOs began pushing for sanctions against Israel and severing ties with the country.

"This was important to the medical arena, because there are close links between the medical-based NGOs that are ostensibly anti-Israel and with [certain medical] journals, especially the *Lancet*," Zadik said.

"Many of the lead authors [who write anti-Israel pieces in these journals] are affiliated with these organizations."

Zadik said Horton, the *Lancet*'s editor has personal views against Israel, referring to a controversial 2007 article he wrote for the *New York Review of Books* and a snapshot of a map of the Middle East he tweeted earlier this year, on which the entire territory of Israel is replaced with the word "Palestine."

A number of DARA members offered suggestions on countering anti-Israel bias in medical journals, such as targeting *Lancet* board members to push for a new editor; trying to get other journals to publish more balanced or pro-Israel pieces; refusing to meet representatives of drug companies that advertise in the *Lancet*; and pressuring others in the medical community not to submit articles to, or cite, the journal.

One woman proposed urging Canadian medical schools to encourage students to take elective courses in Israel, "to show people that Israel does provide modern medicine to diverse groups – not just to Jews – and to show them Israel is not a monster."

Several members spoke about the need to convey a pro-Israel narrative to the news media that shows Israel's contributions to medicine, including its care of Palestinians.

“The anti-Israel narrative exists in the world. It’s always there,” one doctor said. “We’ll waste a lot of energy trying to get rid of one editor when another guy just like him will pop up in a minute to replace him... We need to create our own, positive narrative.”

Sommers urged members to reach out to “at least some of your colleagues who have been silent or indifferent” and engage with them on the subject, as well as encourage them to add their names to DARA’s mailing list. “Then, I think, we’ll have a very concrete potential to go forward.”