

## **Medical conferences are no place to support racism**

### **Avoid host countries that foster discrimination, MD group urges**

Written by Steve Samuel on June 15, 2010

for [The Medical Post](#)

Last month the 22nd Congress of the International Society on Thrombosis and Haemostasis (ISTH) was held in Cairo, Egypt. No Israeli doctors were able to participate. An Israeli member of the governing council and chairman of the education committee of the ISTH, who had helped organize the event in Egypt, had been denied an entry visa by the Egyptian government. Although this could have been resolved diplomatically, an action by the Egyptian Medical Syndicate (EMS), which is the only official body representing Egyptian physicians, closed the door completely.

On May 9 a bulletin from Dr. Hamdi al-Sayed, head of the EMS, said “the union would refer those who participate (in the conference) to disciplinary courts for violating the successive resolutions of the general assembly (of the EMS) since the early ’70s, opposed to normalization with the Zionist entity. . . . The union of the doctors would hunt down the organizers of the conference, and will work hard to cancel (it), especially in the presence of a Zionist doctor.” In doing so, the organization representing Egyptian medical professionals had declared that it is less interested in learning about thrombosis and hemostasis than in perpetuating hatred and racism.

This is not the first time politics and hatred got in the way of the dissemination of medical knowledge. In November 2009, a regional breast cancer conference in Egypt was sponsored by the Susan G. Komen Foundation for the Cure. A couple of days before the event the Egyptian government withdrew entry permits for Israeli experts who had registered for the conference. The EMS betrayed its anti-Semitism and ethical poverty when it invoked as the reason a modern “blood libel,” claiming that Israeli doctors murder Palestinians for their organs. After the sponsoring organization in the U.S. was contacted and encouraged to cancel its sponsorship, the Egyptian government relented, but too late for the Israelis to attend.

### **Academic freedom**

DARA, Doctors against Racism and Anti-Semitism, is a grassroots organization of more than 500 health-care professionals whose mission is the quest of truth, objectivity and verifiability in medical literature, and the pursuit of academic environments free of harassment, incitement, intimidation, racism and anti-Semitism. Since its inception, DARA has had several opportunities to address the problems described above in various forms.

When DARA became aware of the Ontario Medical Association's sponsorship of a CME cruise that would stop in the United Arab Emirates, DARA contacted the embassy in Ottawa and confirmed that registrants travelling with an Israeli passport would be denied entry. The OMA was alerted to this conflict with its own code of ethics, which forbids discrimination against any group on the basis of gender, age, religion, nationality, colour and sexual orientation. The OMA withdrew its sponsorship of the conference.

A regional anesthesia conference scheduled in Dubai lost the endorsement of the American Academy of Emergency Medicine after notification by DARA. The World Federation of Societies of Intensive and Critical Care Medicine made it clear to the UAE group that their current travel restrictions would prevent the federation from holding larger international events in their country.

Recently the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery endorsed a conference in Lebanon. DARA has notified the executive of the ISAPS that Lebanon bars entry to anyone with an Israeli stamp in his/her passport. This would exclude many Canadian and American members.

The purpose of medical conferences is to share information and expertise, inspire research through co-operation and intellectual stimulation and ultimately improve patient care. There is absolutely no place for bigotry in the culture and practice of medicine. DARA urges all institutions that sponsor medical and scientific events, to consider carefully where they allocate their resources. It is about time that international medical and scientific societies avoid scheduling their events in host countries where discrimination, racism and xenophobia trump the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge intended to alleviate suffering and treat disease.

*Steve Samuel is a Toronto doctor and chairman of DARA.*