Physicians’ Groups Say Nuclear Threats Are Even Greater Today Than in the Past

Tracy Hampton, PhD

Throughout history, physicians and other health care workers have dealt with catastrophes, caring for the victims and often feeling helpless when a disaster is so great that many lives are instantly lost or are beyond saving. For decades, a group of physicians has been urging other clinicians, political leaders, and the public to imagine an event of apocalyptic proportions that could very possibly occur today. The cause would be nuclear war.

In the early 1960s, the newly formed Physicians for Social Responsibility (PSR) published a comprehensive analysis of a clearly defined thermonuclear attack on the United States, including its human and ecologic consequences in a given area, specifically metropolitan Boston and southern New England (Ervin FR et al. N Engl J Med. 1962;266:1127-1137). In the Boston area alone, the analysis estimated, the blast, heat, and radiation from a thermonuclear attack would kill 1.4 million people and injure another 1.25 million. Of the latter, 1 million would die because no effective health care intervention would be possible. The authors urged physicians to educate people about such health dangers and to work to prevent them, as they do in other areas of preventive medicine (Sidel VW et al. N Engl J Med. 1962;266[22]:1137-1145).

The work by PSR grew into an international movement, leading to the 1980 founding of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW), which recruited more than 150,000 doctors worldwide, held numerous international conferences that included US and Russian military leaders, met with world political leaders, and appeared on specially produced television programs broadcast through the former Soviet Union and the United States. In 1985, the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to IPPNW for its service to humankind by spreading authoritative information and creating an awareness of the catastrophic consequences of nuclear warfare.

Victor Sidel, MD, who is a distinguished university professor of social medicine at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine’s Montefiore Medical Center and an adjunct professor of public health at Weill Cornell Medical College, says the attack that was realistic in 1962 is modest in comparison with present global nuclear capabilities: there are now approximately 100,000 nuclear warheads in the stockpiles of today’s nuclear-armed nations, with a destructive magnitude that is equivalent to 200,000 Hiroshima-sized bombs. Thousands of these weapons are on hair-trigger alert and could be launched within moments, and the threat of mutual assured destruction in a war sparked by accident, misperception, or intent is still real.

Sidel (who, along with Bernard Lown, MD, of Harvard School of Public Health; H. Jack Geiger, MD, MScHyg, of City University of New York Medical School; and others, was a cofounder of PSR) spoke with JAMA recently about his group’s efforts and the nuclear threats facing the world today.

JAMA: Why, as a physician, did you decide to take action against nuclear weapons, as opposed to other causes where physicians can have a positive effect?

Dr Sidel: The development of thermonuclear weapons, with a destructive force as much as 1000-fold greater than the bombs used at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, convinced me that physicians had a responsibility to act to prevent the use of these weapons. PSR and IPPNW provided avenues for collective action.

JAMA: Today, how do our risks associated with nuclear weapons compare with those from 50 years ago?

Dr Sidel: The acquisition of nuclear weapons by nations in addition to the United States—the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, France, China, Israel, India, Pakistan, and North Korea—increases the risk of their being used.

JAMA: Can you describe some of the destructive scenarios that could occur today due to nuclear weapons?

Dr Sidel: There is a real danger of nonstate groups, often called terrorists, obtaining or building nuclear weapons and using them. Recent research by Dr Ira Helfand shows that limited use of nuclear weapons, such as a nuclear exchange between India and Pakistan, could cause widespread crop failure and worldwide famine.

JAMA: What concerns do you have related to possible nuclear accidents, and how do they compare with your fear of potential terrorist attacks using nuclear weapons?

Dr Sidel: The release of radiation at Harrisburg, Chernobyl, and Fuku-shima provides evidence that nuclear power generation, which uses fissionable materials such as the highly en-
Punitive Laws Undermine HIV Prevention, Says Report

Rebecca Voelker

AWWS, POLICIES, AND LEGALLY SANCtioned customs in more than 100 countries undermine efforts to prevent new HIV infections and provide medical care for people with HIV/AIDS, according to a recent report from the United Nations–backed Global Commission on HIV and the Law (http://tinyurl.com/82e62xy).

“Too many countries waste vital resources by enforcing archaic laws that ignore science and perpetuate stigma,” said Commission chair and former president of Brazil Fernando Henrique Cardoso in a statement.

The report cited a number of laws, policies, and practices that impede progress against the pandemic, including the following:

• Exposing another person to HIV or transmitting the virus is a crime in more than 60 countries. But instead of encouraging safer sex practices, the report noted that such laws discourage people from seeking an HIV test or medical care or disclosing their status.
• Half of people with HIV worldwide are women and girls, but laws and customs in some regions condone violence against women and genital mutilation among girls. These practices make them vulnerable to infection and undermine their ability to protect themselves from HIV, the report stated.
• Contradictory to international human rights standards, same-sex sexual activity is a criminal offense in 78 countries. The fear of arrest often drives populations underground, away from HIV services, while incarceration can expose detainees to sexual assault and unsafe drug use that promote transmission.
• International trade law and intellectual property protections have hampered the production and distribution of low-cost generic drugs.

The Commission called on governments to outlaw discrimination and violence, repeal punitive laws, and enact policies that encourage HIV prevention and effective medical care. “Now, more than ever, we have a chance to free future generations from the threat of HIV,” Cardoso said, citing scientific discoveries and billions of dollars invested in halting the pandemic over the past 3 decades.

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