



Offline: The system is not working



Richard Horton

Geneva, the World Health Assembly. Sitting in a corner of the Serpent Cafe at the Palais des Nations, one can observe the collegial diversity of multilateralism. Delegates to WHO's annual convention of member states warmly embrace one another, swap business cards, engage in earnest dialogue, draft and redraft amendments to resolutions, catch up on email, queue for lunch, and even, for a tiny few, enjoy a cigarette on the terrace. A white board encourages you to "Sign and tell us how you support Health for All." The mood is animated and optimistic. But beneath this veneer of cooperative exchange, there exists a system that is not working—a system, indeed, that is failing, and failing so badly that few can bear to talk about it at all.

*

Together with WHO, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), and the International Federation of Medical Students' Associations, *The Lancet* co-hosted a side-event at the World Health Assembly on the health situation in Gaza. We were meeting at a moment of catastrophe for Palestinians. The people of Gaza, most of whom have had nothing to do with Hamas or the Hamas-led terrorist attacks of Oct 7, 2023, are suffering a systematic attempt to destroy their lives and the health system that supports their lives. It is a human crisis—but also a crisis for humanity itself. Because why is this mass slaughter being permitted by the international community? Dr Majed Abu-Ramadan, Palestine's Minister of Health (he is an ophthalmic surgeon and a former Mayor of Gaza City), described the conditions in his homeland. "It's a truth that there's a genocide", he said. The attacks on Gaza are designed "to destroy all possibility of life". Over 80% of hospitals and primary care centres have been damaged. Amputations are taking place without anaesthetic. There is no safe place for civilians to shelter. "I'm not defending October 7", he said, "because we condemn all civilian deaths regardless of states, race, or nationality." But the numbers of Gazans reported as killed "are true and are not politicised". We were able to connect by video to Dr Hend Harb, who leads an UNRWA health centre in Gaza. She described how they were living with "destruction and despair". She has fled her home five times. Her children



Richard Horton



Richard Horton

queue for 12 hours to buy bread, only to return with empty hands. Dr Ghada Al-Jadba is Chief of UNRWA's health programme in Gaza. Her home was in Gaza City and has been completely destroyed. It was not a nightmare, but the worst possible reality. "The concept of humanity has been placed at the edge", she said. Dr Richard Peepkorn is WHO's Representative in the occupied Palestinian territory. Despite working in Africa, Asia, and most recently in Afghanistan, "I have never seen what I have seen in Gaza...the destruction is beyond belief." The numbers of deaths reported are underestimates. Injuries—over 80 000 and counting—are horrific. More than 10 000 people are missing under the debris of bombed buildings. The "health system is under attack". 723 health workers killed. 931 injured. 128 detained or arrested. Remaining health staff are exhausted. Essential medicines are in short supply. Malnutrition is on the rise. Patients are under siege.

*

The prospects for this failing system look bleak. Donald Trump again as US President? The far right making electoral gains across Europe? Murderous political leaders able to act with impunity? Purveyors of disinformation, working under the rubric of The Geneva Project, who proclaim that, "We, people of the world, no longer abide by the tyrannical rule of unelected global officials and their vision of the future"? A collection of anti-vaxxers, right-wing activists, and conspiracy theorists gathered at the World Health Assembly on June 1 to declare their opposition to WHO's efforts to negotiate a pandemic agreement. What is the cause of this breakdown of belief in an international community? There are many possible culprits. Racism. Populism. Nationalism. But I think it was Dr Ghada who identified one especially important root cause: the loss of our humanity. The system is failing because our humanity—our compassion towards each other—has been eroded and, in some instances, erased. We are numb to one another's pain. We refuse to see the distress of our neighbour. We turn away from the misery of others. We seem to be hardly human anymore.

Richard Horton
richard.horton@lancet.com