



COMBATANTS MUST RESPECT NEUTRALITY OF HEALTH WORKERS

The AMA has joined international calls for governments and armed combatants to respect the medical neutrality of doctors and other health professionals working in conflict zones around the world.

Following a year of deadly attacks on hospitals and health workers in 2015, the AMA has backed efforts by the World Medical Association, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and others to ensure the safety of doctors and other health professionals involved in providing care to the sick and injured in global trouble spots.

AMA President, Professor Brian Owler, said today there was a proud tradition of Australian health professionals volunteering to work in some of the most difficult and dangerous places in the world to provide lifesaving health care, and every effort should be made to ensure that they can do so safely.

“Every year, many Australian doctors and nurses willingly put themselves in danger in order to help those caught up in wars, natural disasters, disease outbreaks, and other tragedies,” Professor Owler said.

“It has been very disturbing to see that health workers, whether by accident or deliberate targeting, are becoming casualties themselves. This must stop.

“We need to do all we can to ensure that those who go to areas of conflict to provide care can do so without interference, and can return home safely.”

The AMA President’s comments have come amid mounting international concern over attacks on health workers and medical facilities.

More than 4200 health workers were killed, beaten, tortured, or shot in 2398 incidents identified by the ICRC in just 11 countries between 2012 and 2014, and last year there were several high-profile attacks, including a devastating US bombing raid on a Medecins Sans Frontieres hospital in Kunduz, Afghanistan, in which 30 people – 13 of them MSF staff – were killed.

In the wake of these attacks, governments from around the world attending an ICRC conference last month reaffirmed their commitment to international humanitarian law and a prohibition on attacks on the sick and wounded, as well as those caring for them.

Professor Owler said it was imperative that governments and armed combatants:

- respect medical neutrality and the duty of doctors to care for the sick and injured, impartially and without discrimination;
- allow health workers to attend the sick and injured freely, independently and in accordance with the ethical principles of their profession, without fear of punishment, imprisonment, prosecution or intimidation;
- ensure the safety, independence and personal security of health workers at all times; and

- protect medical facilities and transports, and ensure that people have safe, unimpeded access to care.

Professor Owler said attacks on hospitals and health workers not only hurt the individuals directly targeted, but had far-reaching effects on communities by depriving them of access to much needed health services.

The AMA President urged employers and the medical profession to do all they could to support those who volunteered to go to trouble spots to provide vital medical care.

“Here in Australia we need to support our colleagues who go overseas to help in conflict zones, ensuring they are fully informed of the personal risks, and that they have the skills and competence to work in such situations,” Professor Owler said.

“In particular, we need to make sure they are supported when they return home, and receive appropriate care for their own health and wellbeing.”

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