

Abolishing the world's worst weapons

Nuclear weapons abolition — a medical imperative

One could be forgiven for not noticing, but there has been groundbreaking activity going on that is headed in the direction of a ban on the world's most destructive weapons. This year, 2015, could see the start of negotiations for a treaty to eliminate nuclear weapons, which were first used 70 years ago on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The medical profession, including in Australia, has a history of extremely important advocacy on this issue that must be continued.

The recent developments are a series of international conferences focusing on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons, hosted by the governments of Norway (March 2013),¹ Mexico (February 2014)² and Austria (December 2014);³ the Vienna conference attracted 158 governments. Each of these conferences has concluded unequivocally that the humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons are so catastrophic that no government or non-government organisation would have the capacity to respond to either the short-term or long-term effects of their use.³ Many government delegations at the conferences noted that the risk of nuclear weapons use is higher than is commonly understood. (As an indication of this risk, on 22 January this year, the hands of the Doomsday Clock of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, which warns of our proximity to nuclear and other catastrophic perils, were moved from 5 minutes to midnight to 3 minutes to midnight⁴). The risk is increasing and there is an urgent need for nuclear disarmament.

These international fact-based gatherings have reaffirmed the central message of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW):⁵ if nuclear weapons are used again, health services will be unable to respond in any significant way.⁶ Whatever health care facilities survived the attack would be overwhelmed to the point of collapse, offering little more than primitive first aid.⁷

Recent research has added a further dimension and risk. The report, *Nuclear famine: two billion people at risk?*, released by IPPNW in December 2013 and based on research by climate scientists, concluded that, in the event of even a limited nuclear exchange, the particulate matter and smoke from burning cities would block sunlight and cause agricultural collapse, placing more than two billion people globally at risk of starvation.⁸

IPPNW's Australian affiliate is the Medical Association for Prevention of War, which, in 2007, launched ICAN, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons. ICAN has played a key role in advocating a nuclear weapons ban treaty, and was the chosen civil society partner in Norway, Mexico and Austria.

if nuclear weapons are used again, health services will be unable to respond in any significant way

Ruins of Nagasaki, Japan, after atomic bombing of 9 August 1945, as seen from a hillside opposite the Nagasaki Hospital in October 1945.



The Australian Red Cross has also played a pivotal and leading role by helping secure the passage of a resolution of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in November 2011. The resolution stated that “the existence of nuclear weapons raises profound questions about the extent of suffering that humans are willing to inflict, or to permit, in warfare”, and urged laws to prohibit their use and eliminate them.⁹

As momentum builds unmistakably towards a ban treaty, there is a renewed call to action for our profession. At the World Medical Association General Assembly in South Africa in October 2014, the Association referred to its International Council a new resolution calling for a ban on nuclear weapons, and urging national medical associations to educate the public and policymakers about this overwhelming public health threat. The resolution will be voted on at the next meeting of the Council in Oslo in April 2015 and at the General Assembly later in the year; it deserves the strongest possible support.

Although Australia does not own any of the world's 16 300 nuclear weapons, successive Australian governments support “deterrence” by United States nuclear weapons — that is, a threat to use the weapons — and pay mere lip service to the goal of abolition.

Medical and humanitarian professionals have already played a crucial role in advocating for the removal of the global nuclear weapons threat. The emergence now of a strong majority of the world's governments committed to the same goal represents unprecedented progress and opportunity. Medical voices are needed now as much as ever, to seize the opportunity while it lasts, and to help delegitimise and stigmatise these horrific devices. The elimination of the worst of all weapons of mass destruction, each one of which represents a medical and humanitarian disaster of nightmare proportions, is both necessary and possible.

Competing interests: I am a Vice President of the Medical Association for Prevention of War (Australia), on the Board in Australia of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons and on the Board of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War.

Provenance: Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed. ■

Susan J Wareham
OAM, MBBS
Canberra, ACT.

warehams@
ozemail.com.au

doi: 10.5694/mja14.01173

Online first 13/4/15

References are available online at www.mja.com.au.

- 1 Conference report: Humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons. 2013 Mar 4-5; Oslo, Norway. New York: Reaching Critical Will, 2013. <http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/oslo-2013/HINW-report.pdf> (accessed Feb 2015).
- 2 Second conference on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons. Chair's summary. 2014 Feb 13-14; Nayarit, Mexico. <http://www.sre.gob.mx/en/index.php/humanimpact-nayarit-2014> (accessed Feb 2015).
- 3 Vienna conference on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons; 8 to 9 December 2014. Report and summary of findings of the conference. http://www.bmeia.gv.at/fileadmin/user_upload/Zentrale/Aussenpolitik/Abbruestung/HINW14/HINW14_Chair_s_Summary.pdf (accessed Feb 2015).
- 4 2015: it is 3 minutes to midnight [press release]. *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 2015; Jan. <http://thebulletin.org/clock/2015> (accessed Feb 2015).
- 5 International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War. Physicians and nuclear war. <http://www.ippnw.org/physicians-for-prevention-nuclear-war.html> (accessed Feb 2015).
- 6 World Health Organization. Effects of nuclear war on health and health services. 2nd ed. Geneva: WHO, 1987: 5.
- 7 British Medical Association (Board of Science and Education). The medical effects of nuclear war: the report of the British Medical Association's Board of Science and Education. Chichester: John Wiley, 1983: 124.
- 8 Helfand I; International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War: Physicians for Social Responsibility. Nuclear famine: two billion people at risk? Global impacts of limited nuclear war on agriculture, food supplies, and human nutrition. Nov 2013. <http://www.ippnw.org/pdf/nuclear-famine-two-billion-at-risk-2013.pdf> (accessed Feb 2015).
- 9 Council of Delegates of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Working towards the elimination of nuclear weapons. Resolution. Document prepared by the International Committee of the Red Cross in consultation with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and National Societies. ICRC, Nov 2011. http://www.redcross.org.au/files/CoD_Working_Resolution_Towards_the_Elimination_of_NW.PDF (accessed Feb 2015). ■