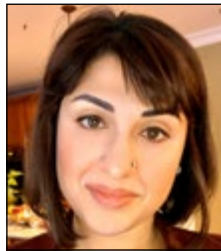


The WMA and the Foundations of Medical Practice. Declaration of Geneva (1948), International Code of Medical Ethics (1949)



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Practising Medicine “with conscience and dignity”

Beginning with the Declaration of Geneva (the Declaration), for over 70 years the World Medical Association (WMA) has maintained that physicians must practise medicine with conscience and dignity [1]. On the Declaration’s 70th anniversary, seven associate WMA members raised serious concerns about their ability to remain in medical practice if they fulfil this obligation by refusing to support or collaborate in the killing of their patients by euthanasia and assisted suicide (EAS)[2].

The physicians practise in Canada, where euthanasia and assisted suicide (EAS) are legal, [3,4] recognized as therapeutic medical services by the national medical association [5,6] and provided through a public health care system controlled by the state, which also regulates medical practice and medical ethics. The national government is now poised to make EAS available for any serious and incurable medical condition, vastly increasing the number of patients legally eligible for the service [7].

In these circumstances, it is urgent to reassert that the duty to practise medicine “with conscience and dignity” includes unyielding refusal to do what one believes to be wrong even in the face of overwhelming pressure exerted by the state, the medico-legal establishment and even by medical leaders and colleagues. That the founders of the WMA not only supported but expected such principled obstinacy is evident in the WMA’s early history and the development of the Declaration, all of which remain surprisingly relevant.

Early Developments: 1945–46

A meeting of physicians from 30 countries in London in June 1945 discussed the formation of an international medical association [8, 9]. Some continental physicians spoke of crimes by physicians in their countries during the war [10], and over the next 18 months the world medical community became increasingly aware of physician participation in crimes against humanity [8, 11, 12].

National medical association delegates returning London in September 1946 were uneasy and ambivalent about plans to na-

tionalize health care systems in Britain and the Continent. On the one hand, they welcomed the growing interest in medicine by governments around the world. On the other, they worried about the consequences of (as later expressed) transforming all physicians into “Civil Servants controlled by the State” [13, 14]. They conceived an international medical association as support for national associations defending practitioners and patients from government demands. They reminded the British health minister that physicians treat human beings, not collections of tissue, and must practise with “a discipline of the heart that makes it difficult to integrate [them] into the State machine” [15].

While delegates were motivated to organize the WMA by concerns about the profession-state relationship, they were also deeply disturbed by physician participation in war crimes [8].

In the month following the London gathering, twenty German physicians were arraigned in Nuremberg [13]. And the organizing committee drafted the WMA constitution and prepared for the first General Assembly while the Nuremberg “Doctors Trial” was in session. Reports from