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MOUTHPIECE

New medical peace work course

Mike Rowson

A major new distance learning collaboration in the field of medical peace work has now been launched by a consortium of European partners, led by the Centre for International Health at the University of Tromso, Norway and including Medact.

Ranging across every aspect of collective, interpersonal and structural violence, and including online case studies on subjects as diverse as Darfur, domestic violence, poverty and caring for refugees, the course makes a major contribution to enhancing the peace capacity of health workers across Europe.

The meaning of peace in our course is not simply the absence of war but, following the work of Johan Galtung, mutually beneficial relationships, fair structures, and a culture of peace. Peace is also a capacity to handle conflicts with empathy, creativity and by non-violent means.

Mediation skills

So whilst the course discusses violent conflict and the effects of weapons systems on health, it also stresses the need for health workers to build up non-violent communication and mediation skills. It is premised on the idea that health professionals have a key role to play in promoting peace, due to the trust and respect they are afforded by society.

The course is a 60-hour long, self-directed learning experience. It comprises a digital textbook with 79 lessons and hundreds of multiple choice questions, complemented by a further 21 online cases which get students to engage with the reality of the issues they have dealt with in the textbook. The course is divided

into seven modules which can be completed separately or all together.

Defining 'peace'

Modules 1 and 2, set the normative framework for the course, giving students an idea why peace is defined so broadly to include the absence of poverty and humiliation as well as of 'direct violence'. More conventionally, module 2 introduces students to international humanitarian and human rights law – the legal framework that students will need to understand how to work in conflict-affected backgrounds.

Module 3 focuses on weapons and war, giving a comprehensive guide to the health effects of weapons of all sizes from nuclear to 'non-lethal' and discussing how their effects can be prevented. It also analyses the history of the health peace movement and gives students some campaigning skills.

Causes of violence

The controversial issue of structural violence is tackled in section 6 – large scale deprivations like poverty, inequality and ill-health and the social forces that cause them – and the underlying causes of direct violence. It analyses the political, economic and social explanations of civil war and presents case studies for students to analyse.

Module 5 shifts from the primary approach to prevention covered in the preceding modules to focus on what can be done during conflict to prevent worse things from happening. It looks at the history of military medicine and the latest clashes between military and humanitarian objectives in contemporary

armed conflict. It shows how humanitarian practitioners need to ensure their aid 'does no harm', and provides professionals with skills in conflict mediation.

Impact of war

Module 6 uses the experience of refugees and other migrants to tie many of these themes together. Tracing the migrant's journey from poverty and conflict to reception in host countries, the module examines the effects of conflict on people, refugee law, and the health effects of migration. Given the high numbers of refugees in Europe it sets out some core issues that European health workers need to understand to improve the care of this vulnerable and marginalised group of people.

Module 7 focuses on community level interpersonal and self-directed violence, broadening the scope of peace medicine to its widest extent so far. It examines different preventive strategies on issues such as domestic violence and suicide.

Overall the course shows the linkages between the different levels of violence and tries to give health professionals a clear idea of how to engage in prevention of violence at all these levels.

We hope that you will enjoy this detailed and pro-active attempt to promote health and peace work to the broadest possible audience.

You can look at or take the course by registering at www.medicalpeacework.org/. It is also available on CD-ROM. If you work at an educational institution please promote it to your students.

Medact is an organisation of health professionals challenging social and environmental barriers to health world wide. It highlights the health impacts of violent conflict, poverty and environmental degradation, and acts with others to eradicate them.

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