

Doctors break the bad news

For the last twenty-two years the Pugwash conference has brought together scientists from countries of the north, south, east and west, irrespective of political allegiances, to discuss such topics as disarmament, arms control and problems of development. At the conference held in August this year in the Netherlands, the members of the medical working group issued the following warning that they considered should become widely known.

1 That medical disaster planning for a nuclear war is futile

A nuclear war would result in human death, injury, and disease on a scale that has no precedent in history, dwarfing all previous plagues and wars. There is no possible effective medical response after a nuclear attack - in one major city alone, in addition to the hundreds of thousands of sudden deaths, there would be hundreds of thousands of people with severe burns, trauma and radiation sickness - all demanding intensive care. Even if all medical resources were intact, the care of these immediate survivors would be next to impossible. In fact, most hospitals would be destroyed, medical personnel among the dead and injured, most transportation, communication and energy systems inoperable, and most medical supplies unavailable. As a result, most of those requiring medical attention would die.

Medical problems that would be minor and curable in normal times - infections and fractures for example - would prove fatal for many. Numerous deaths would also occur from the interaction of multiple, simultaneous injuries which would be trivial if each occurred singly. Large numbers of those who escaped an acute death would suffer mutilating injuries. Furthermore, under the conditions of rampant chaos and terror, the incidence of psychiatric disorders would sharply rise. The risk of long term effects, such as cancer, would increase during their entire lifetime for many survivors, and possibly for their offspring as well.

2 That effective Civil Defence against a nuclear attack is impossible

Bomb shelters in cities under nuclear attack would be useless owing to the blast, heat and radiation effects. Shelters as far as ten kilometres from the centre of even a one megaton surface nuclear explosion would become ovens for their occupants - the great surface fires would cook and asphyxiate them. At greater distances, shelters would provide only temporary protection against the high levels of radioactive fallout. In a nuclear war, one would emerge from a shelter into an environment that was a nightmare - water would be undrinkable, food contaminated, and the economic, ecologic, and social fabric, on which human life depends, destroyed. For the survivors, the risk of epidemics would be great, as a result of: the unburied human and animal corpses everywhere; multiplication of viruses, bacteria, fungi and insects, which are highly resistant to radiation; and the high sensitivity to radiation of the human body's ability to fight infection.

In sum, there are no defences against the lethal effects of nuclear weapons, and there is no effective treatment for those who initially survived a nuclear attack. Under all conditions, medically, nuclear war would be an unparalleled catastrophe.

As doctors of medicine and scientists in health-related fields, we conclude, therefore, that nuclear weapons are so destructive to human health and life that they must never be used. Prevention of nuclear war offers the only possibility for protecting people from its medical consequences. There is no alternative.