



Re-Starting Physicians for Social Responsibility



By Harry Wang, MD

IN 1961, A GROUP OF PHYSICIANS from New York and Massachusetts met in cardiologist Bernard Lown's home to form Physicians for Social Responsibility (PSR). Their goal was to educate the medical profession and inform the public about the dangers of nuclear weapons.

The *New England Journal of Medicine* published their articles detailing the potential human, ecological and social costs of developing, deploying and maintaining nuclear weapons. They took the position that any medical response would be woefully inadequate, disputing the prevailing government view that recovery, with proper planning, was possible after nuclear attack.

PSR was instrumental in demonstrating that open-air nuclear tests were exposing Americans to unacceptable levels of radiation. They collected the baby teeth of children showing the presence of strontium 90. This contradicted what the US government had been saying, leading to a public outcry that ended US atmospheric tests and led to passage of the Limited Test Ban Treaty of 1963.¹

PSR's success and the respect it earned as an effective national organization led to the formation of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) in 1980.² IPPNW included Soviet and American physicians who carefully studied the effects of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and reiterated that nuclear war would be the "final epidemic" for which there could be no "cure" or meaningful medical response.

Working closely with PSR and IPPNW-Russia, they educated health professionals, political leaders and the public about the catastrophic consequences of nuclear war. For this effort, IPPNW was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1985. With more arms control treaties, and with the collapse of the Soviet Union, PSR shifted its concerns to environmental health issues (*e.g.*, lead poisoning, persistent organic pollutants) and violence prevention (*e.g.*, gun violence).

In 1980, several Sacramento physicians organized a local chapter of PSR. Dr. Neil Flynn was the first president, under whom Dr. Ed Rudin developed a speakers bureau that responded to requests from community and medical groups for information about nuclear weapons and related topics. Later in the decade, Dr. Rudin, Dr. William Kohl, Dr. Fred Pratt, Dr. Tony DeRiggi and Dr. Robert Meagher presided over the local group.

For many of those years, Dr. Rudin organized a series of public meetings in concert with other knowledgeable local groups, such as Educators for Social Responsibility, and the United Nations Association. A series in 1991 considered "Re-Defining National Security," and in 1992, "The New World Order." The last public information effort by Sacramento Area PSR was publication of a multi-disciplinary study to identify the roots of violence. This four-year literature study, led by Dr. Rudin, was published in 1997.

Recently, PSR and IPPNW have taken a position against the threatened war on Iraq,

jointly releasing "Collateral Damage — The health and environmental costs of war on Iraq." This report presents the "real cost" of the war in human, environmental, and economical terms.³

Physicians should consider educating themselves regarding issues of peace and the effects of social inequities that lead to discontent and injustice; the psychological effects on children and adults of war, terrorism and the threat of war, diversion of economic resources from other social and medical needs (e.g., smallpox vaccination program competing with other "public health" needs), and a US foreign policy that risks war for oil and power.

Today, no local physician group exists for such study outside of the Bay Area chapter of PSR. Anyone interested in re-forming a local chapter of PSR, please contact Bill Durston, MD, at bdurston@aol.com (916-638-0126) or Harry Wang, MD, at harrycwang@attbi.com (916-733-5077).

The writer thanks Dr. Ed Rudin for information about previous activities of the Sacramento Area PSR.

1. <http://www.psr.org/membership/history.pdf>
2. <http://www.ippnw.org/IPPNWHistory.html>
3. http://www.psr.org/Medact_Iraq_report_final3.pdf

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