

**EDITORIAL**

## Ethical principles of health care in emergencies

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Civilian and military health-care organizations share the common goal of improving the safety of their personnel and other health assets and the delivery of impartial and efficient health care in armed conflicts and other emergencies,

Referring to the principles of humanity, whereby human suffering shall be prevented and alleviated wherever it may be found and impartiality, whereby health care shall be provided with no discrimination;

Bearing in mind the standards of international humanitarian law, in particular the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their 1977 Additional Protocols, and of international human rights law, specifically the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966);

Considering the principles of professional ethics adopted by health-care professional associations, including the WMA Regulations in Times of Armed Conflict and Other Situations of Violence;

Endorse the following ethical principles of health care:

### **General principles**

1. Ethical principles of health care do not change in times of armed conflict and other emergencies and are the same as the ethical principles of health care in times of peace.
2. Health-care personnel shall at all times act in accordance with relevant international and national law, ethical principles of health care and their conscience. In providing the best available care, they shall take into consideration the equitable use of

resources.

3. The primary task of health-care personnel is to preserve human physical and mental health and to alleviate suffering. They shall provide the necessary care with humanity, while respecting the dignity of the person concerned, with no discrimination of any kind, whether in times of peace or of armed conflict or other emergencies.

4. Privileges and facilities afforded to health-care personnel in times of armed conflict and other emergencies are never to be used for purposes other than for health-care needs.

5. No matter what arguments may be put forward, health-care personnel never accept acts of torture or any other form of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment under any circumstances, including armed conflict or other emergencies. They must never be present at and may never take part in such acts.

### **Relations with patients**

6. Health-care personnel act in the best interest of their patients and whenever possible with their explicit consent. If, in performing their professional duties, they have conflicting loyalties, their primary obligation, in terms of their ethical principles, is to their patients.
7. In armed conflict or other emergencies, health-care personnel are required to render immediate



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attention and requisite care to the best of their ability. No distinction is made between patients, except in respect of decisions based upon clinical need and available resources.

8. Health-care personnel respect patients' right to confidentiality. It is ethical for health-care personnel to disclose confidential information only with the patient's consent or when there is a real and imminent threat of harm to the patient or to others

9. Health-care personnel make their best efforts to ensure respect for the privacy of the wounded, sick and deceased, including avoiding the use of health care for the wounded and sick, whether civilian or military, for publicity or political purposes.

#### **Protection of health-care personnel**

10. Health-care personnel, as well as health-care facilities and medical transports, whether military or civilian, must be respected by all. They are protected while performing their duties and the safest possible working environment shall be provided to them.

11. Safe access by health-care personnel to patients, health-care facilities and equipment shall not be unduly impeded, nor shall patients' access to health-care facilities and health-care personnel be unduly impeded.

12. In fulfilling their duties and where they have the legal right, health-care personnel are identified by internationally recognized symbols such as the Red Cross, Red Crescent or Red Crystal as a visible manifestation of their protection under applicable international law.

13. Health-care personnel shall never be punished for executing their duties in compliance with legal and ethical norms.

#### **Final**

14. By endorsing these ethical principles of health care, the signatory organizations commit themselves to work for the promotion and implementation thereof wherever possible, including by appropriate dissemination amongst their members.