

Against the Dying of the Light: Medicine's Quiet Resistance

Victor Grech

The world groans under the weight of war. From the ruins of Gaza to the shelled hospitals of Ukraine, from the famine-stricken clinics of Yemen to the tense standoff over the South China Sea, the twenty-first century, far from fulfilling its promise of peace and progress, has revealed a darker truth. This is the century wherein precision-guided missiles fly faster than ambulances, where cities crumble while laboratories strive to build miracles of healing, and where the medical oath to preserve life is tested by the organised machinery of death. The juxtaposition is grotesque: as one hand reaches for the scalpel, the other reaches for the trigger. And in the middle of this violence we, the medical profession, must not take sides, but remain steadfast, and stubbornly humane.

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COVER PICTURE

'Valletta'

Victor Grech is a consultant paediatrician with a special interest in paediatric cardiology. He finds photography and painting relaxing pastimes. He curated the world's first collective AI (artificial intelligence) exhibition in 2023 at Esplora Malta and this was his entry.

Medicine, by its very nature, is an act of resistance. It resists entropy and decay, it resists despair, and above all it resists the cold arithmetic of conflict where lives become collateral, and suffering is strategically ignored. In an era when borders are drawn in blood, and truth itself is fractured along ideological lines, twisted beyond recognition and presented as alternative facts, the physician unwaveringly approaches the broken body with one universal imperative: to heal. To do no harm. To preserve the light, however faint.

Ours is a quiet resistance. It does not march with banners nor chant slogans. It does not command armies or make headlines. But its strength lies in its refusal to surrender to the illogic of destruction. In a hospital ward where a child lies wounded by a drone strike, or a mother clutches her baby in the rubble of a maternity clinic, medicine answers with dignified hard work and does not question who is right, but questions what is needed. A tourniquet. Oxygen. Blood. To keep a heartbeat going.

What a strange paradox we inhabit! The same science that gives us organ transplants, gene therapy, and vaccines that tame pandemics also gives us nerve agents, drone swarms, and hypersonic missiles. Artificial intelligence, hailed as the next frontier in diagnostics and personalised care, is equally being harnessed to guide autonomous weapons to their targets. Biomedicine and bioterror evolve side by side. It is not knowledge we lack, but wisdom.

Furthermore, the violation of medical neutrality in wartime is no longer the rare outrage but the standard backdrop. Hospitals are bombed and ambulances are targeted. Physicians are detained, disappeared, or executed. The Geneva Conventions, once thought to define a sacred zone around the sick and wounded and those who care for them, are daily elided by political convenience and military expedience. Yet in cities under siege, field hospitals continue to function. In refugee camps, under rain and snow, doctors continue to work by torchlight. Indeed, their resistance is not just in what they do, it is in what they refuse to become.

There is power in choosing empathy when fear demands silence. There is power in stitching wounds when the world unravels. Every act of healing is a

refusal of despair or nihilism. Every surgical intervention in a war zone, every vaccination in a refugee settlement, every psychiatric session with a trauma survivor is a candle against the overwhelming dark. Physicians are not do not carry weapons of war – we are not soldiers. But we are, in our own way, warriors of another kind, albeit quiet, relentless, unarmed.

Let us not pretend that medicine is untouched by politics. Access to care is political. Distribution of vaccines is political. Research funding is political. The silence of medical institutions in the face of atrocities is political. But our profession's core remains profoundly ethical: to see in the patient not a passport, not a religion, not an allegiance, but a human like us, a person. That is what makes medicine more than a career. It is a vow to do our best to heal. And in times like these, vows matter more than ever.

The world will not be saved by idealism alone. But neither will it be saved by cynicism. Somewhere in between lies duty, our duty. And medicine, with all its limits and all its miracles, embodies that duty more purely than most callings. We cannot stop wars, but we can refuse to be shaped by them. We cannot stop the bombs, but we can tend to those they leave behind. We cannot reverse death, but we can walk alongside the dying with tender compassion, and ensure that the light does not go out unnoticed.

This editorial is only another small candle in the dark. It is not a call to retreat from the world, but to engage with it more fiercely and even more humanely. To speak out when medical neutrality is breached. To support colleagues working in impossible conditions. To educate ourselves on the ethics of war, peace, and global health. And to remember, always, that medicine is not just about curing illness but also about affirming the value of life, this precious short life of ours, especially when life is being devalued.

In the gathering dusk of a world that sometimes forgets its own humanity, medicine does not shout. It does not rage. It resists, not with fire, but with light. Not with conquest, but with compassion. In every clinic, in every ward, in every battlefield tent, the quiet resistance continues. It is not loud, but it is luminous. *Primum non nocere* – long may medicine endure.