



# OBITUARIES

## Jonathan Fine: founder of Physicians for Human Rights

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London, UK



[Image: Credit: Ulrike Welsch/the Boston Globe /Getty Images]

When Jonathan Fine was 6 years old, his father gave him five dollars and suggested that he send it to help blind children in China. “That was the first time I was aware of anything except three meals a day and summer camp somewhere nice,” he said.

“The knowledge opened up the world to me and influenced all my career choices,” said Fine, who has died at his home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, aged 86.

In 1981, when he was a director of a community health centre in Boston, Fine joined a medical delegation to Chile to investigate the case of three doctors who had disappeared during the Pinochet regime. He discovered where the doctors, supporters of Allende, were imprisoned and helped secure their release five weeks later. The delegation’s report, published in the *New York Times*, described the doctors’ detention as “a serious act of state repression.” “That was pretty heady. It showed me a few people could get a megaphone and make a difference,” he said.

### Physicians for Human Rights

In 1986, working with a group of other doctors, he founded and became the first director of Physicians for Human Rights (PHR), believing that doctors and other health professionals could bring unique skills to the investigation and documentation of abuses.

“We have lives in our hands and take great care to report things as they are, to be objective,” he said.

Resigning from his job, Fine, then 55, financed the fledgling organisation by selling his house and drawing on his pension. “I proudly impoverished myself and have no regrets about it,” he said in an (unpublished) oral history for PHR in 2014.

“We worked from two rooms and did everything ourselves, setting up a network of doctors, buying plane tickets, and starting investigations,” recalls Susannah Sirkin, now director of international policy for PHR. “From the beginning Jonathan knew the power of publicity, and almost everything we did was covered by the media.”

Since its inception PHR has worked in some 60 countries, including Afghanistan, Burma, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Syria, and Zimbabwe. In its first decade, it undertook more than 70 missions.

Early investigations led by Fine included the use of teargas in South Korea, the deployment of chemical weapons against Kurds in Iraq, and injuries to protestors in the Palestinian territories occupied by Israel. In 1997 PHR was part of a coalition awarded a Nobel peace prize for campaigning for a ban on land mines.

“Jonathan was fearless, persistent, and very good at gaining people’s confidence,” said Bob Lawrence, a co-founder of PHR, now professor emeritus at Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, who went on several missions with Fine. “In the Philippines the government wouldn’t let us into the prisons, but Jonathan knew some nuns who suggested how we could do it, and we were able to get in and take testimonies on torture.”

### Early life and career

The son of Jacob and Anne Fine, Jonathan was born in Boston, where his father was chief of surgery at Beth Israel Hospital. He attended Roxbury Latin School, followed by Swarthmore College, where he asked to share with a black room-mate and organised a boycott of the town’s barbers who would not accept black customers. During the McCarthy era, he served as a private in the US army “where I was outrageously suspected of being a subversive and was investigated by the FBI at great public expense,” he told the *Lancet* in 2002.<sup>1</sup>

After a period at Harvard Law School, Fine switched to Yale to study medicine and was awarded a Fulbright scholarship to study health in India. “That was a seminal event for me,” he said. “I became interested in poverty overseas and injustice.”

He then did an internship in Puerto Rico and a residency at Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston. He worked for the US Agency for International Development in Washington and Peru. He served as deputy health commissioner and director of public health and community services for Boston and was responsible for establishing health centres throughout the city. He also set up the Boston area bicycle coalition.

Standing down from PHR in 1993, at the age of 62, he directed a centre for Brazilian immigrants in Boston and spent time in Chhattisgarh, India, supporting local doctors, but always with a wary eye on his own profession as well as governments. Speaking at King Edward Memorial Hospital in Mumbai in 2011, he criticised doctors employed by the government, who spent most of their time on private practice, leaving rural health centres understaffed, as well as the injustice of poverty in India.

In 2007, at the age of 75, on witnessing the distress of an elderly friend with colon cancer, he set up Bedside Advocates, a Boston organisation of volunteers prepared to support patients through hospital stays.

“Jonathan was energetic and unstoppable,” said James Welsh, former medical coordinator for Amnesty International, whom Fine visited in London before he set up PHR. “He had a vision and made it happen. Physicians for Human Rights is stable and well respected, with international visibility.”

Looking back on his life in 2014, Fine described himself as reckless and fearless, with a good imagination. “A contrarian of sorts, best at emergency and urgent situations.”

Fine leaves his fourth wife, Chris Connaire, whom he married in 2014. His first three marriages ended in divorce. He leaves three children from his first marriage.

## Biography

Jonathan E Fine (b 1931; q Yale 1962; DPH), died from old age on 17 January 2018

- 1 Jonathan E. Foie gras, fine words, and failure—just another UN summit. *Lancet* 2002;359:2047. [www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(02\)08555-0/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(02)08555-0/fulltext). 10.1016/S0140-6736(02)08903-1 12086753

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