John Launer: Israel and Gaza—recognising shared human values

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All Muslim and Jewish doctors, and many of other faiths or none, will have felt tormented by the recent horrific events in Israel and Gaza. I share with many colleagues not only a sense of despair at the inhumanity of these events but also one of helplessness, in the face of the unfathomably destructive forces underlying them. Anyone with connections to the region will have been especially affected. I have relatives on one side of the border between Israel and the Palestinian territories, as well as friends and colleagues on both sides of it.

I’ve visited and taught in medical schools in both places. I know at first hand that seeing young people eat, drink, joke, and flirt in a bar in Ramallah is almost identical to observing the same scene in Tel Aviv, apart from a different alphabet on the menu. Only the tragic and divisive history of that part of the world has led to those young people perceiving their worlds in a way that seems irreconcilable—and to others seeing them in that way too. The word “insanity” barely captures the gulf between what is and what might have been, or what’s been achieved in other countries where violence once seemed intractable.

Since the current desperate situation began in October, a group of us with experience of developing primary care in the West Bank and Gaza have been meeting regularly online. We’ve acknowledged to each other how little we can do to make a difference, but we’ve also agreed that doing nothing is unacceptable. We come from a range of faith backgrounds, which puts us in a position—and arguably gives us a responsibility—to speak out against the polarisation of views that underlies this terrible conflict and feeds on it. Only the tragic and divisive history of that part of the world has led to those young people perceiving their worlds in a way that seems irreconcilable—and to others seeing them in that way too. The word “insanity” barely captures the gulf between what is and what might have been, or what’s been achieved in other countries where violence once seemed intractable.

We can resist the demonisation of others on the basis of national, ethnic, religious, or political affiliation—and instead spread narratives of friendship, collegiality, shared learning, and all other bonds that challenge the stereotypes of inevitable differences or conflict. In conversations in our own communities and more widely about Israel and Gaza, we should try to rise above identity politics and polemics to recognise our shared human values.

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1 Shahid HJ, Wallace PG. The healthcare community must approach the violence in Israel and Gaza with inclusive compassion. BMJ 2023;383:.
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