



# Principles to guide college statements on humanitarian emergencies

## Background

Colleges are often asked to comment on international humanitarian emergencies and sign-up to or produce statements on the issue.

At times it has been difficult for colleges to assess when and whether they should be making a public statement and what criteria they should use for judging whether to comment.

The Academy Council felt it would be useful for the Academy to devise a set of principles which colleges could use to assist in making decisions on when and when not to comment.

The Council is very clear that these are not prescriptive requirements. It is for each college or faculty to make its own decisions on what they do and do not support, the action they might take, and how to justify the decision to their members.

It was also recognised that each issue may be very different, but it was felt that colleges may find it useful to be able to demonstrate that they were acting in line with principles adopted by all colleges.

## Key questions

The key questions when considering whether to comment on an international humanitarian crisis

*Is this within the remit for college comment?*

Colleges are healthcare organisations and their remit is health. They are also charitable bodies covered by Charity Commission requirements. The focus of any college statements

should therefore be issues which directly adversely impact on the health of people in this country or overseas.

Humanitarian crises which arise from natural disasters (e.g. the 2004 Tsunami) or man-made catastrophes (e.g. the invasion of Ukraine) are both worthy of consideration.

Equally, attacks on healthcare professionals should probably be within the remit for comment. In 2017 the Academy Council supported a statement in support of MSF work to strengthen the protecting of medical missions in places of conflict and gave the Academy authority to speak out publicly on this issue.

However, there may be actions taken by Governments which are deeply abhorrent and abuse the rights of their citizens but might not be considered a legitimate area for comment by a college.

### *Why is the college commenting?*

It is worth taking time to consider why a college should want to make a statement or act on an international issue. These could be:

- At the request of overseas colleagues impacted to make a public statement and/or put pressure on their governments
- In response to member pressure to take a public position
- A wish to be seen to make clear a statement of support/opposition to a particular issue.

It is important that there is a clear purpose for any statement. There will be many issues of world politics where the opinion of a UK medical college is really not going to be of relevance or interest.

### *What are the criteria/thresholds for a comment or statement?*

It clearly is important that that college's actions are not seen to be preferential or discriminatory. But that does not mean that a response is required to every issue and colleges will want their own criteria/thresholds on what to support. This needs to encompass:

- The scale of the crisis
- The extent of concerns raised by members over the issue.

The opening of a UK Disasters Emergency Committee appeal may be a good criteria for/ trigger point for major humanitarian disasters, but may not cover all cases where colleges are approached for support, particularly in cases of mistreatment of individual clinicians or specific minorities.

Two examples of college policies are set out in the Appendix.

### 3. Principles for colleges to consider:

- The focus of any college statement/action on overseas humanitarian emergencies should relate to issues which directly adversely impact on the health of people in the impacted country or area
- Colleges may also respond to cases of mistreatment/attacks on healthcare professionals seeking to carry out their duties. This may be generically or specific individual cases
- It is generally not the role of colleges to comment on international political issues per se
- Humanitarian emergencies can arise from natural disasters or man-made conflicts
- Colleges should be able to clearly articulate the purpose of any statement or action and what it is intended to achieve
- The opening of new Disasters Emergency Committee appeal is a good trigger for considering a statement or action in respect of a humanitarian emergency
- In cases of mistreatment/attacks on healthcare professionals, colleges will need to make their own judgement whether it is appropriate to respond
- Colleges should seek to apply consistent criteria to their decision making so they are not perceived as being supportive only to some groups or discriminatory in any way
- It will be for colleges to decide what actions they wish to take, but as a rule they will:
  - Share and signpost to internationally recognised guidance
  - Work in partnership with relevant professional bodies and national agencies
  - Not duplicate efforts of other organisations

# Appendix

## Examples of college policies for responding to international humanitarian crisis

### RCPsych Emergency Response Plan

The RCPsych is an international membership organisation and is the UK professional body for psychiatry. The College works to secure the best outcomes for people with mental illness, learning difficulties and developmental disorders by promoting excellent mental health services, supporting the prevention of mental illness, training outstanding psychiatrists, promoting quality and research, setting standards and being the voice of psychiatry.

Our vision is to be a strong and progressive College that supports its members to deliver high-quality patient-centred care across the UK, and all over the world.

The RCPsych has built up a body of knowledge from the response it has provided to a number of international emergencies. Humanitarian emergencies are caused by a number of factors, including natural disasters, political upheaval and acts of violence. When responding to an international disaster the College will work in ways that are respectful of the peoples and culture of regions and nations in which we are working, and our work will respect the needs of patients and always be person-centred.

This plan sets out the principles and the processes the College will follow when responding to international emergencies in a coordinated, timely and effective fashion.

#### *Principles*

The College's Emergency Response plan will

- Be triggered when the UK's Disasters Emergency Committee opens a new appeal
- Share and signpost to internationally recognised guidance
- Work in partnership with relevant professional bodies
- Coordinate a unified College response
- Ensure that any response is helpful, is appropriate and protects human rights
- Be delivered within existing College capacity, with any additional resources being approved by SMT and Officers
- Operate within the financial regulations as set out by the charity commission

### *Processes*

- Once an Emergency Response Delivery Plan is activated the College will
- Make contact with relevant national psychiatric association(s), international psychiatric associations (e.g. World Psychiatric Association) and relevant College members to ascertain what level of College response, if any, would be of assistance.
- Create a steering group to coordinate the College response. Membership of this steering group will include international team staff, at least one College officer, relevant Presidential Leads, representatives from the IAC and at least one member of SMT. The steering group will meet regularly for the duration of the emergency.
- Create a central list of activities and actions which will be updated weekly
- Tailor its resources and response to the particular needs arising from each individual situation, for example translating our resources into particular languages or arranging training sessions for those involved in delivering mental health services
- Share existing College resources with relevant stakeholders
- Update members on College responses via newsletters and social media channels and a weekly update on the website

### *The College will not*

- Become involved in direct mental health service delivery
- Encourage members to become involved in supporting efforts in an individual capacity
- Duplicate efforts of other organisations

## RCGP Criteria for making international statement

- The issue does not conflict with the College's charitable aims and purpose
- The issue has been shown to be one on which members have expressed concerns and made clear a wish to see the College take a position