

# Commentary

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## Physicians, Heal Thyselves

by Sally Satel

**I**N THE WAKE OF THE OCTOBER 7 ATTACK ON ISRAEL, MANY UNIVERSITY presidents issued wishy-washy public declarations. But what about medical schools? The event provoked minimal response, which came in distinct contrast to the avalanche of impassioned avowals after the murder of George Floyd in 2020, when medical schools, journals, and professional groups called for “dismantling racism.”

Negligible reaction is fine with me. Professional schools and organizations have no obligation to weigh in on domestic and international tragedies—though in extreme cases, like the butchery in Israel, the impulse to condemn perpetrators of unprovoked attacks might seem irresistible.

For example, my own professional organization, the American Psychiatric Association, offered this: “Antisemitism and all forms of prejudice and hatred are unacceptable, and we stand with the Jewish people, now and as always.” But even this statement, in my view, went a bit too far. Although I am Jewish and found the sentiment genuinely moving, I don’t think the APA should claim to stand with *any* group—even one I consider deserving.

A better way to use the moral authority of the medical profession would be to condemn organizations within its midst that improperly politicize their mission. Here is one candidate: a national medical student group called White Coats for

Black Lives, WC4BL, which took the occasion of the murder of more than 1,000 Jews to provide a full-throated expression of solidarity with Palestine.

On October 17, this appeared in my inbox: “In the past week, the Israeli military has escalated efforts for the genocide of the 2 million Palestinian residents of Gaza. Now is the time for physicians and physicians-in-training to use our power to amplify Palestinian people’s demands for freedom, safety, and dignity. Please see below for some resources and information about how to get involved.”

WC4BL listed ways to “participate in in-person protests and sit-ins.” I understand their concern for innocent Gazans, but claiming *genocide* by the Israeli military is an egregious slander. The University Minnesota chapter reposted messages on X/twitter calling for “Palestinian resistance to free themselves from their oppressors *by any means necessary*” (my italics) and stopping aid to Israel. (screen shots sent)

Formed in 2015, WC4BL has chapters at 75 of the nation’s 155 medical colleges. The group describes itself as “a national medical trainee organization with aims to dismantle racism ...and fight for the health of Black people and other people of color.” Its Vision and Values statement calls for “dismantling dominant, exploitative systems in the United States, which are largely reliant on anti-Black racism, colonialism, cis-heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism.”

After George Floyd’s murder in May 2020, WC4BL, which is pro-reparations and against “fat phobia,” organized die-ins at medical schools across the country, with thousands of students in white coats and surgical scrubs lying on campus lawns for eight minutes and 46 seconds (the length of time a Minneapolis police officer knelt on Mr. Floyd’s neck).

WC4BL pressured almost 200 state and local governments to declare racism as a public health crisis and persuaded several medical schools to adopt its causes.

The Association of American Medical Colleges' (AAMC), highlighted WC4BL by name in its recent guide to anti-racism planning, suggesting that medical colleges develop a scorecard “similar” to the White Coats for Black Lives’ Racial Justice Report Card.

That Report Card lists over 30 imperatives for medical schools and the hospitals in which they work, such as that “Black, Indigenous, and Latinx residents/fellows are [to be] represented in all programs at rates corresponding to the demographics of the U.S. population (13% Black, 1% Indigenous, 17% Latinx)”—never mind that such proportions do not reflect the demographics of the qualified medical school applicant pool.

Anti-Israel mandates appear in the Report Card, too. Hospitals are urged to “divest from private prisons, security forces, prison profiteers and prisons and companies that facilitate Israeli apartheid.” The group also demands that “the hospital conducts no joint research endeavors with Israeli academic institutions or corporations.”

There should be no place in any medical school for interest groups that engage so aggressively in political campaigns bearing no relationship to medicine or that impose limits on scholarly endeavors for the good of patients everywhere.

Of course, medical students and physicians are free to express their support for even the worst Palestinian organization—as private citizens. But WC4BL is trying to bring the full weight of the medical profession to bear on its causes. That’s wrong.

The WC4BL episode is representative of the growing trend among medical trainees to claim social justice as part of their mission that calls for immigration reform, ending the electoral college, changing housing policy, confronting capitalism, and “dismantling racism.”

But doctors are wholly ill-prepared to identify strong causal links between health and sprawling upstream economic and social factors. Our job is to diagnose and to treat—a big enough challenge. When we use the profession as a vehicle for politics, we dilute our efforts and erode the trust of the public

WC4BL has taken political involvement to a new level. Its members are in danger of alienating fellow medical students, colleagues, and professors—people with whom they need to collaborate, especially during the last two years of medical school when they help care for patients.

Imagine a Jewish patient in the hospital—*any* patient—who learns about the group and its sentiments. Doubts will surface about whether a trainee assigned will deliver the best care and why any medical center accommodates such a group.

Members of WC4BL are poised to violate the oath they took upon entering training for the profession: At least, do no harm.

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