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DISCUSSION

Should a medical ethics journal discuss the actions of the security forces?

RAVINDRA B GHOOI

This refers to the comment "Use of pellet guns for crowd control in Kashmir: How lethal is 'non-lethal'?" by Siddarth David in the *Indian Journal of Medical Ethics* (1). My objection is not to the ethics of the use of pellet guns, but to the ethics of publishing such an article in a journal devoted to medical ethics.

Every coin has two faces, and every story two sides. When one discusses the violence in Kashmir following the gunning down of the self-proclaimed terrorist Burhan Wani, two versions emerge, one in favour of the protesting population and the other in favour of the security forces. Pellet guns did cause much pain and agony to the victims, this is not denied; but whether the security forces had an option needs to be discussed from an ethical point of view.

Gangs of protestors put women and children in front and threw stones, grenades and other lethal missiles at the security forces. This was a unique situation where mobs tried to set fire to bunkers, injure other citizens and the armed forces, and kill

the men in uniform by various methods. It is true that stray pellets hit some people but major injuries were caused near the bunkers of the security forces. So what could our armed men have done? These men are soldiers by training, and not ethicists and armchair philosophers.

The sovereignty of the nation is supreme, and anyone who challenges it will face the forces meant to protect the same. The army, Border Security Force (BSF), and police have no personal grudge against the protestors, but they are mandated to protect the nation and they do so with whatever means they have at their command. Soldiers are not supposed to question authority. When ordered to go into the valley of death, they have gone forth, without a thought for their own lives.

As an Indian, I would certainly question terrorists like Wani and separatists like Geelani. Do they represent the will of the people? These separatists have never won an election, hence their popularity is questionable. Even a victory in elections is meaningless, since the electorate is carefully manipulated. One community in Kashmir has been harassed and chased out of their homes, systematically, over the last 25 years. The electorate now is only made up of people whose sympathies lie in one direction.

The author states that various NGOs (including Amnesty International) have condemned the use of pellet guns; but have these organisations condemned the actions of terrorists

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To cite: Ghooi RB. Should a medical ethics journal discuss the actions of the security forces? *Indian J Med Ethics*. 2017 Apr-Jun;2(2)NS: 127-8.

Published online on January 27, 2017.

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and separatists? To be fair to the author, he concedes that the Jammu and Kashmir High Court refused to ban the use of pellet guns. So who is right, Amnesty International or the Jammu and Kashmir High Court? In most cases the rule of law is above all, but when it contradicts a particular belief then the courts are under fire.

The *IJME* is meant to discuss issues related to medical ethics; defence of the country's sovereignty, counter-insurgency and the effects of the same should not feature on this platform. It is unethical to raise questions on the actions of the security forces, knowing full well that no one among them can respond.

Let us leave it to the newspapers and television channels to debate such issues; let us discuss only what we understand.

Conflict of interest statement

The author owns up to a conflict of interest. His son has been fighting anti-national forces for the last 12 years as an officer of the Indian Army.

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A question of ethics, not nationalism: author's response

SIDDARTH DAVID

The aim of the comment "Use of pellet guns for crowd control in Kashmir: How lethal is 'non-lethal'?"(1) was neither to disparage the armed forces, nor recommend counter-insurgency strategies, nor support any particular community or group. It sought to raise discussions around the question pointed out by the responder (2) himself, namely, "the ethical point of view" on the use of pellet guns in controlling violent mobs. The author also feels that the question is not so much about "favouring" the protestors or the security forces, but whether an instrument that causes significant fatalities and morbidities among bystanders should continue to be used as a method of crowd control.

Additionally, the author accepts that the conflict in Kashmir involves complex political dimensions, tragic human costs on all sides, and multiple ethical issues that need to be addressed; but concedes that this is a subject too vast to be addressed in a 1200-word commentary. The use of pellet guns would surely be

one of several ethical aspects of this conflict and no one ethical consideration takes precedence over the other.

While the author is not a spokesperson for Amnesty International, human-rights groups have condemned violence perpetrated by any group. Raising questions on judgments by the judiciary is a part of democracy, and the author feels that he, as an Indian, is entitled to do it.

Finally, the author believes that ethical questions can be raised by any person be it a protestor, security personnel, academician, scientist, farmer and even a doctor, as ethics deals with principles of right and wrong. Hence, the author (whose grandfather was a decorated lieutenant commander in the Indian Navy) feels that having or not having a family member in the armed forces is not a test, or a conflict of interest, while talking about ethical issues. And it is surely not a badge of nationalism.

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To cite: David S. A question of ethics, not nationalism: author's response *Indian J Med Ethics*. *Indian J Med Ethics*. 2017 Apr-Jun;2(2)NS: 128.000

Published online on January 27, 2017.

© *Indian Journal of Medical Ethics* 2017

***IJME* is indexed on Pubmed, Scopus & TPI.**

Articles from *IJME*, as also from the journal's previous titles *Medical Ethics* (1993-5), and *Issues in Medical Ethics* (1996-2003) are indexed on Pubmed.