

Saving One Life While Thousands are Lost: A Reflection on Health Justice and Global Inequities

Binlerce Kişi Hayatını Kaybederken Tek Bir Hayatı Kurtarmak: Sağlık Adaleti ve Küresel Eşitsizlikler Üzerine Bir Değerlendirme

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Dear Editör,

Just last night, I spent more than an hour in the emergency department fighting for the life of a 70-year-old man with advanced lung cancer. We intubated, gave medications, performed chest compressions, and finally stabilized him for transfer to intensive care. My team and I gave everything—merely to prolong one fragile life by a few days or weeks. And then the question struck me: while we fight with all our strength to save a single life here, thousands of young and otherwise healthy people die each day from hunger, war, poverty, and the denial of basic needs. Is this justice?

This paradox weighs heavily on clinicians everywhere. On one side of the scale lies the unrelenting labour of health workers—fighting minute by minute for the survival of one patient. On the other side lies a world where famine, conflict, and inequality erase thousands of lives in an instant. The imbalance is stark, and the injustice undeniable.

The numbers speak clearly. In 2023, an estimated 733 million people—one in every eleven worldwide—faced hunger, and nearly one fifth of Africa's population was undernourished (1). Conflict-driven hunger kills up to 21 000 people each day (2). Around nine million deaths annually are attributed to

hunger-related causes, with malnutrition contributing to half of all child deaths (3). The situation is catastrophic in Gaza, where almost half a million people endure famine conditions (4). Since 2020, an additional 200 000–300 000 famine-related deaths have occurred each year (5).

Armed conflicts deepen the crisis. In 2023, there were an estimated 122 000 battle-related deaths, including over 71 000 in Ukraine and 23 000 in Gaza (6). By 2024, this toll had risen to more than 230 000 (7). Confronted with such figures, it is impossible not to feel both sorrow and disbelief. These numbers dwarf the victories of any single hospital ward. While doctors and nurses struggle to preserve one fragile life, political decisions and systemic neglect extinguish countless others elsewhere. It is as if we are pouring every ounce of effort into saving one flame while an entire forest burns around us.

Some may argue that saving one life and addressing global mortality are incomparable acts. Yet this comparison is unavoidable. Without it, the grotesque imbalance remains invisible—and invisibility leads to normalization. Medicine cannot remain neutral while structural injustices render its triumphs insignificant.

As clinicians, we know each life matters. Every pulse restored, every breath regained, carries immeasurable value for patients and families. Yet we must also acknowledge a difficult truth: our work, while noble, is incomplete unless the broader determinants of survival—peace, nutrition, and equity—are addressed. The real injustice lies not in our bedside struggles but in a global order that permits preventable deaths on such a scale.

Advanced medicine achieves extraordinary feats—resuscitating the dying, sustaining fragile lives—but fails to reach those deprived of the most basic needs. The result is a tragic inversion: miracles for a few, silent deaths for the many. True health justice requires shifting our moral lens from heroic interventions for the individual toward collective survival for the vulnerable.

Surrender is not an option. To walk away from a single patient because others are dying elsewhere would betray the essence of medicine. Instead, we must hold both truths at once: that our bedside work matters profoundly, even as it is dwarfed by systemic failure. One does not cancel the other. Medicine teaches that life is precious in its immediacy; justice must remind us that life is precious in its totality.

Health professionals cannot solve these inequities alone. Governments, institutions, and societies must recognize that food, water, and peace are the most fundamental medicines. Saving lives cannot remain solely the burden of hospitals while political choices extinguish them on a massive scale. Just as clinicians fight for one heartbeat, citizens and leaders

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must fight for the survival of millions. Advocacy is not an optional add-on to medicine—it is the shared extension of our humanity.

Health, peace, and justice are inseparable. Only when this

collective responsibility is embraced will our daily struggles for one vulnerable life finally be part of a balanced global equation. Until then, we continue—fighting for each life we can, while refusing to ignore the millions lost in silence.

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