

## Time for healthcare bodies to show they are no longer apartheid-era relics and say ‘never again’ to genocide

**To the Editor:** The International Symposium on Microbial Ecology (ISME) opened at the Cape Town International Convention Centre on 18 August 2024. Outside, members of various Palestine solidarity organisations protested the involvement of three Israeli speakers in the conference. These invitations were issued amid the daily ongoing mass killing of Palestinians in Gaza, including healthcare workers and aid workers, with over 40 000 confirmed killings and 92 000 injured at the time.<sup>[1]</sup> More than 180 000 deaths may be attributable to the ongoing attacks, according to a conservative estimate published in the *Lancet*.<sup>[2]</sup> The Palestine Solidarity Campaign, in a statement 2 days prior, explained that such involvement served to normalise Israeli apartheid, which was particularly unacceptable in South Africa (SA), a country with its own brutal history of apartheid. The absence of Palestinian academics and healthcare workers, who have been systematically targeted and killed by the Israeli military,<sup>[3]</sup> stood in stark contrast to the platform given to the Israeli academics. All universities and the majority of schools in Gaza have been destroyed in what is regarded as a scholasticide by United Nations experts.<sup>[4]</sup> The re-emergence of polio in Gaza had also just been announced days prior, with a ceasefire the only way to ensure health security in Gaza and neighbouring countries.<sup>[5]</sup> The global eradication of polio has been deeply compromised by Israel's destruction of water and sanitation services in Gaza, which will set back global health initiatives for years to come. The organisers of ISME have simply ignored this reality.

Protests, such as the one outside ISME, have become a global phenomenon over the last 10 months as Israel continues its relentless assault on Gaza, which is considered by numerous countries, rights groups and aid organisations to be a genocide-in-progress.<sup>[6,7]</sup> Israeli-American historian and professor of Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Brown University, Omer Bartov, stated that it was clear that Israel was ‘engaged in systematic war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocidal actions.’<sup>[8]</sup> While some seek to justify the attacks as a response to the events of 7 October 2023, this is clearly disingenuous and cannot account for the scale of killing in Gaza, nor the escalation in settler violence and dispossession, supported by the military, which has been a feature of daily life in the illegally occupied West Bank for decades.<sup>[9]</sup> It also fails to account for the many years of land, sea and air blockades and previous ‘wars’ waged on Gaza.

The call for Israeli boycotts is not new. Palestinian civil society organisations have for years called for boycotts, divestment and sanctions (BDS) as a form of solidarity and to exert non-violent pressure and hold Israel accountable for its regime of settler colonialism, apartheid and occupation.<sup>[10]</sup> This was formalised with the launch of the BDS movement in 2005, which has three demands for Israel to comply with international law. These include (i) ending the occupation of Arab lands as recognised under international law, and dismantling the illegal apartheid wall; (ii) recognising the rights of Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality; and (iii) respecting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return home.

BDS is not a purely economic movement.<sup>[11]</sup> Another aspect of the BDS movement is the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI).<sup>[12]</sup> Israeli universities are subject to boycotts owing to their deep complicity in Israel's denial

of Palestinian rights. This includes the development of weapon systems and military doctrines, justifying the colonisation and ethnic cleansing of Palestinian land and other violations of human rights. Israeli academic Maya Wind, in her 2024 book *Towers of Ivory and Steel*,<sup>[13]</sup> describes in detail how Israeli universities have been enlisted in Israel's settler-colonial project. Examples include how campuses are strategically built to entrench Israeli territorial expansion and Palestinian dispossession by creating facts on the ground, degree programmes for the military and secret police and research agendas that service military rule.

Importantly, PACBI calls for the academic boycott of complicit Israeli institutions, and not individuals. This includes cancelling all agreements, projects, research and events with such institutions, and a boycott of any propaganda initiatives. The call further includes the cancellation of speeches by representatives of complicit institutions at international venues, and the termination of membership of Israeli associations in world bodies. The institutional boycott does not include the boycott of individual academics based on their identity, in line with the principles of academic freedom and non-discrimination. Common sense dictates, however, that such academics should be boycotted if they are complicit in or responsible for violations of human rights or international law, whether these relate to Palestine or more generally. A complete list of academic boycott actions is available on the PACBI website.<sup>[12]</sup>

Given the current genocide happening in Gaza, conference organisers inviting Israeli academics should clearly distance themselves from the actions of the Israeli government and condemn the mass killing of civilians, including healthcare workers and aid workers. They should condemn the destruction of the health and education systems. In addition, speakers should not be allowed to present their work under Israeli affiliations, especially if the institution has supported the illegal actions of the Israeli government.

The Palestinian BDS movement was inspired by a global anti-apartheid movement that, together with other pressures such as domestic uprising, was instrumental in ending apartheid in SA. It would be fitting, then, for SA institutions to lead by example at this moment. They cannot continue business as usual with entities complicit in colonialism and racial oppression. To continue academic collaboration without addressing these serious concerns subjects academics to intellectual hypocrisy and double standards. Unfortunately, local organisers of ISME chose to ignore communication prior to the event and reneged on promises to meet with protesters. In doing so, and by providing a platform to academics from complicit institutions, they have chosen to be complicit themselves.

The SA medical profession has a bleak history of complicity with apartheid.<sup>[14]</sup> How we choose to respond to the suffering of the Palestinian people, which has exponentially increased since October 2023, making our response more urgent, will be a litmus test of the progress we have made since the dawn of our democracy. Are we doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past with our indifference, or worse, complicity? Or have we truly learned from the injustices of our past? ‘Never again’ means never again for everyone, not for a select few.

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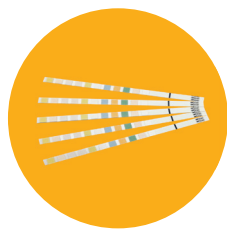
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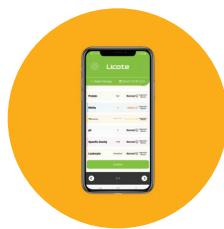
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