

MD group criticizes possible US attack on Iraq

Canadian support for a US attack on Iraq would contravene numerous international agreements, Physicians for Global Survival (PGS) says.

At a Parliament Hill news conference Jan. 15, PGS said the federal government has to make a choice between support for the UN and its various international conventions, or support for the US. "There is a severe disconnect between these agreements and the political support of the ... US," said PGS president Joanna Santa Barbara, a child psychiatrist from Hamilton (see Commentary, page 435).

The day PGS issued its plea, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien held his own news conference and refused to rule out Canadian participation in a US-led attack on Iraq. PGS, which has about 5000 members, including nonphysicians, says violating a country's sovereignty with pre-emptive war is "frankly illegal under the UN Charter." (Article 51 prohibits war in the absence of invasion or imminent threat of invasion from a hostile country.)

PGS, the Canadian affiliate of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, says an attack on Iraq would also be "inconsistent with the obligation of states under the Geneva Convention to protect the lives of civilians."

"This is a turning point in Canada for our commitment to international law," said Dr. David Swann, a Calgary public health specialist and peace activist who last year demonstrated in front of

his MP's office to protest sanctions against Iraq (*CMAJ* 2002;166[10]:1319). "If we go along with the US folly, we will lose our integrity."

Swann (swann.activist.ca/), who visited Iraq for a second time in November to document the preparedness of its health care system, says that system has been in disarray since the 1991 Gulf War and the introduction of economic sanctions that followed it.

Child mortality rates have more than doubled, and the incidence of low birth weights has quadrupled. The leading cause of death is diarrhea, due mostly to destruction of water-treatment systems during the bombing during the 1991 war — 60% of the treatment systems are still out of commission.

There are also "frustrating shortages" in all areas of health. In a children's ward where 30 nurses once worked, a single RN now provides care. "We can only imagine what would happen in a war," says Swann.

Public health is also in crisis. Immunization rates have dropped to 75% from 90% before the 1991 war, and there is widespread malnutrition. "I sense an anger at the self-righteousness and violence the West has inflicted on these people," states Swann.

Swann wants physicians to speak out against war. "Physicians carry tremendous moral and technical expertise that's needed ... to influence public policy. We

must recognize that this is about prevention and is directly relevant to our work."

PGS has proposed 5 alternatives to war, including convening a meeting co-hosted by the UN and the Organization of the Islamic Conference, which represents 56 Islamic states, and nurturing democratic movements in Iraq. — *Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ*

Popularity of smoking shrinking fast

Only about 1 in 5 Canadians now smokes, the Canadian Tobacco Use Monitoring Survey indicates. This decrease to 22% of the population aged 15 and older represents a 37% decline from the 35% level set in 1985.

The data, collected during a telephone survey of 43 973 households in 2001, indicate that smoking is declining within all age groups. It remains most common among males aged 20 to 24, 35% of whom smoke, but has declined to 22.5% among teenagers.

In British Columbia, the smoking rate has been cut in half (17% vs. 33%) since 1985, and in Quebec it has plummeted to 24% from 40%. Today BC and Ontario (20%) have the lowest rates, while Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Manitoba share the highest rate, 26%. — *CMAJ*

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