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Ethics Essay Writing Competition 2017

# Protest Action in Higher Education: Rights and Responsibilities of Health Sciences Students

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## *Astract*

Protest action plays an integral part in the health sciences students education by developing their ability to provide holistic health care. The environment of the student is the university, this environment could function as a experimental and educational niche for Health care students. Health care and practitioners should be able to identify the unethical actions of government and private sector. Furthermore, they should be able to respond to unethical practices in resistance that aims to improve the national health of the country. These skills can be acquired through a promotion of social involvement by the student within the higher institution. Health care students must become skilled at balancing ethical dilemmas at an early stage of their education in order for graduates to be well skilled at solving social issues in a ethically sound manner. When social involvement is an attribute that the higher institution would like to afford their future graduates then the institutions should make an effort in partnering with students to bring about positive social change in the institution as well as society.

## *Introduction*

There has been a tug of war between students and higher institutions in the past few years. Universities are seen as the centers of knowledge, universities are a place where students should be allowed to critically think and the university respond. The changes and resolutions made in places such as an university often manifest into the rest of society. It is the responsibility of the student and the institution to create interactions between one another, especially during times of protests, that can yield solutions that reshape society for the better.

## *Understandings of protest*

Protest is defined as ‘to object’ or ‘declare’<sup>1</sup>. One could also understand it as making a statement or action expressing disfavour of or objection to something’. However, in South Africa (the ‘protest capital’ of the world) many believe that to protest is to merely be part of a mass of angry people meditating on catchy chants in the streets. When a country is named ‘the protest capital’ of the world, one would imagine that the citizens of the particular country would have a master understanding of ‘objecting’ to particular oppressive policies and systems. To protest is to object and to object is to resist. To many people the word ‘protest’ is synonymous to ‘public demonstration’ which is not the case<sup>1</sup>. A continuation of this narrowed down understanding of protest will ultimately create societies of people who are unskilled in the methods available to express disapproval in ways that can bring about positive change in society. Protests are not limited to public demonstration but, they also include petitions, occupations, sit-ins, publications, writings, art and music to name a few.

Historically, institutions of higher education have been a niche for protest action. The participant countries of these protests range from the most developed countries i.e Germany to developing countries such as India<sup>2</sup>. However, protests within the health care profession are less prevalent mainly due to the responsibility for ‘duty to care’ for patients. Additionally, protesters are often portrayed as those who are unthinking and unable to resolve conflict in an orthodox manner. Protesting is not a primitive action<sup>1</sup>, it is also not a means reserved for an unintelligible class of people. Protesting is to resist the unjust and unethical practices of those in power to change it.

### *The purposes of protest*

People resisting unfair practices have shaped society into what we understand as our current reality to be. Protests ended wars, they brought attention to atrocities such as Apartheid and have propelled the discussion and implementation of reproductive rights and policy for women. The quality of health care provision has improved in the past 50 years. When looking at female reproductive health specifically, women now have better safe contraception, abortion and childbirth<sup>3</sup>. To bring about change to fixed structures and ancient systems does not happen spontaneously but, it requires persistent and deliberate objecting. The accelerated change and improvement of reproductive health for women can be associated with the then growing feminist movement of the 60’s and 70’s as well as members of society, including health professionals, objecting to poor provision of health offered to women. Those who care about reshaping the society we find ourselves in, should then, by default, be professional

'protestors' in whatever way possible and necessary. Health professionals hold a position of high esteem in society. If one does not hold protest to high esteem, naturally this individual would not see the need for health sciences students or practitioners to partake in any means of protest. Because health care practitioners are seen as the intellectual, those who deem protest as unintelligible would reject any ideas of health care students or practitioners protesting. These sort of ideas play an integral part in the resistance of health care students and practitioners protesting as well as the resistance of society to accept protesting health care students/practitioners. This is a very old and one dimensional understanding of the role the health care student and practitioner have in bringing about social change.

### *Acquiring skills that will benefit as a professional*

It is of integral importance for the health science student to be a participant in protests that change and re-shape society especially those affecting the health of our nation. Firstly, protest is a basic human right and one who desires to do so should. The self preservation of the health care provider is important in also ensuring that the practitioner functions optimally. Secondly, the health science student has an additional responsibility to advocate for the rights and dignity of their patients. As simple as the above statements are, the question of protest for the health sciences student and practitioners is one that always brings about various ethical dilemmas. Many protests within the health care sector are often initiated by junior doctors in South Africa.<sup>4</sup> Doctors in South Africa have started protesting against long working hours by wearing armbands which show the amount of time they have been working.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the duration of the undergraduates education, very little attention is spent on recognising factors that affect public health and how they might be influenced to deliver desired outcomes.<sup>3</sup> Young doctors approach the initial phases of their professional careers with the expectation of a public health care system that is well resourced. Many health care providers realise that many of the changes that they know would improve the health care of the patients are not in their power but, in the hands of policy-makers, funders, researchers, regulatory bodies and the public to implement.<sup>3</sup> Health care professionals are left frustrated and many move to the private sector where working environments are better resourced and well staffed leaving behind tired and frustrated colleagues. The latter shows that the skill to negotiate with policy makers is one that is lacking within the health sciences field. It is the striking and protesting initiated by young doctors that has brought about small positive benefits to the health care sphere.

“The young, free to act on their initiative, can lead their elders in the direction of the unknown... The children, the young, must ask the questions that we would never think to ask, but enough trust must be re-established so that the elders will be permitted to work with them on the answers.” — Margaret Mead

One would argue that it is the role of the young to initiate social change, as the young are almost always the first to respond to social ills. One could also argue that within the health sciences framework, the new bio-psycho-social model of approaching a patient creates individuals that are more inclined to respond to the psychological and social factors that affect a patient's quality of health provision. Objecting to factors outside of the biological should no longer be a skill that is neglected within the educational framework especially, when holistic models of health care are prescribed. The journey and lessons learned within the student's undergraduate studies play an essential role in the quality of health practitioners' institutions present. The efficacy of the health care system is not exemplary as our focus is still mainly on treatment rather than prevention. Factors that could improve health care systems include long working hours for doctors affecting their health care, bad administration, poor safety precautions for health care providers, placement, lack of resources and large burden of disease to name a few.<sup>5</sup> Many, if not all of these need to be responded to by the health practitioner in an ethical manner. An inability to respond to these factors that affect the dignity of self and patients, including their health care, is an inability to provide health care. An inability to advocate for the holistic care of a patient should be seen as an act of omission of care. It is therefore vital for individuals who have the important task of ‘balancing the ethics of life and death’ to learn this skill in their undergraduate level.

### *Mode of strike*

There are many methods to protest and it is essential to understand why specific methods are used in specific contexts. As described, protests include public demonstration however are not limited to it. Other forms of protest include petitions, art, music etc. The example of the armbands by doctors is also a method of protest<sup>5</sup> however the results of this protest will still be evaluated. We can undoubtedly say that protest that are public and in instances where health care workers stop working are the most distressing. Perhaps the reason why ‘taking it to the streets’ is often seen as a last resort is because it is. Protest is an action of resistance and should not be comfortable for any of the participants. When petitions, discussions and conversations are not solving the issues in conflict, those who want change will ‘elevate’ the

mode of protest. This 'elevation' means that they will put those in power to implement change at a position where negotiation is possible. For any people with skill, the bargaining chip is often your ability to work. For the student, protest methods such as 'stay aways' are futile as in a higher institution, the undergraduate student has almost no bargaining power except for the hope of the humanity of the institution. The Fees Must Fall protests of 2015/2016 were unique in that students were able to, some extent bargain. The bargaining chip of the students was through the shutting down of institutions. These shutdowns put institutions at a loss because if the duration of these shutdowns continued it would deem the academic year incomplete with no graduates. Modes of protest affect both the policy makers and protestors in a negative way. Higher institutions usually face financial loss, bad publicity and failure to commence with the programmes. For the student it is also, financial loss, bad publicity, trauma, threat of expulsion and threat of imprisonment namely. In the context of institutions vs students it seems as though there are certain methods of protest that put the student at a greater loss than the institution.

#### *The impact of protests for students*

Many times students resort to public demonstrations as a means for protest and in a violent nation such as South Africa, students are responded to by violence. Stunt grenades, rubber bullets, student arrests, teargas and police in full gear have become a common expectation for protesters in higher institutions. Students have acquired negative associations with the police as well as institutions.<sup>6</sup>The vulnerability of the undergraduate in higher institutions leaves a negative impact on the individual. Student activists show high incidences of depression and addictions after involvement in protests. Institutions such as The University of Cape Town as well as Stellenbosch University often offer psychological assistance in the aftermath of protests. One can argue that it is because of the vulnerability of the student to the whims of the institution that makes the higher institution a hostile environment for social change.

#### ***General ethical reflection***

##### *Justifiable*

There is seldom ease when declaring a protest just when the protester is an undergraduate student. The protest actions of health care students and practitioners often have a specifically intense backlash in comparison to those in other professions.

Students can protest for (a) the personal, this includes services provided by the university such as accomadation, catering, fees, health facilities etc and (b) the global which includes the patient and social factors in our country. Any strike by students should be deemed justifiable when students understand the policy as unjust. Any stike by students should be deemed

justifiable when the institution has been made aware of this issue but have remained indifferent. Any strike by students should be deemed justifiable when motivated by a responsibility to humanity. Many times the students are willing to undergo immense personal loss for this cause. The only means for protest by the health practitioner to be justifiable is if there is a possibility for the action to be in the betterment of the greater population. It is important to note that many actions are indeed justifiable however there shall be a cost.

### *Oaths*

When doctors in the United states partook in strikes in 2015 comments such as; “If we as a society allow those who care for our sick to abandon their oaths and their duties any more readily than this, then we too have abandoned our sick,”<sup>1</sup> arose. This trail of thought is important as many times the protest of health care providers is seen as an abandonment of their oath. It is also important to note that the speaker shifts the responsibility to society ‘allowing’ for doctors to strike. This ‘allowing’ does not speak to whether or not a health practitioner *may* strike, they may. It speaks to the systemic fault of pushing health care providers to the point where they have to do something as drastic as abandoning their oath however the analysis of ‘abandonment of oath’ is not entirely correct. It is for the health care student and practitioner to not abandon their oaths and their responsibility and attempt to stay as far from that position as far as possible. It is of good ethic to alert those responsible for the patient should you not be able fulfill your working duties. For the large part of health sciences students career, all patients have a qualified health practitioner which is responsible for the patients therefore, it is in this time that students should learn to develop their ability to resist unethical practices. However, the holistic health care student should understand that when they are protesting/resisting/advocating, they are not in an arena that is outside of seeking justice and beneficence (ethical principles) for their patients but, are in the front lines of it. They are, when in this position advocating for the psychological and social aspects of their patients health.

The health sciences undergraduate student has not yet made an oath however, they function in a manner that supports the Hippocratic oath and their education aims at creating graduates that comply to their oath so many of the attitudes and ideas surrounding protesting and the graduated health care provider also apply for the student.

Beneficence is a principle that needs to be well balanced by the aspiring health care professional. In the context of student politics: here the only parties implicated are the student and the institution. In these cases the major contradiction would be that students would not participate in protest action that does not benefit them individually. For instance, students from the queer community who would benefit from unisex bathrooms often find resistance from their cis gendered peers who do not see these bathrooms as desirable. In instances where

there are two major contradictions the institution usually does not act to the protests of minority ideas. Higher institutions and students need to be at the forefront of confronting and solving issues that will benefit the whole group and for future students. The argument of beneficence for the greater good is important for the health sciences student as the profession is associated with the ability to affect life and death.

Resistance and protest exist in a space of where there has not been justice, it exists when policies and systems are not beneficial to the individual but are harmful, ridding patients of any autonomy. The purpose of protest is to create pressure that speaks to the moral of the systems that have control of changing the unethical practices that make holistic health provision impossible. To resist this is then the only way to bring an end to a continuation of a harmful act/ omission of act. Health care students should be able to identify unethical practices in their higher institutions and respond to them appropriately. Health Sciences students and practitioners should be able to identify the unethical actions of government and private sector and be able to respond to it in resistance that aims to improve the national health of the country.

An holistic approach to health sciences should be used to assess the attitudes surrounding health sciences students and protesting. The academic aspect of the students learning is covered well in the curriculum however the work done to improve the understanding of the psycho-social aspects of patients conditions. It is well understood how the psycho-social aspects of an individual can affect the success of the biological treatment.<sup>3</sup> The good physician treats the disease; the great physician treats the patient who has the disease. William Osler

Currently, student activism focuses on topics that include mental health, addiction and gender rights, all topics that those who are knowledgeable in health provision can provide valuable input and have an opportunity to advocate for the rights of their patients. There are administrative and financial shortcomings of our health care system specifically that health sciences students should note and create methods to attempt change. In instances where there is no justice, health sciences students should advocate for it. If the health sciences student is unable to make these important connections of the bio-psycho-social during their undergraduate studies, they will struggle to do so in their professional careers.



Health care movement is about the the patient and the practitioner. Health care students play an important role during their studies, to advocate for negative social conditions that affect them and their peers. Examples would include long hours of work, occupational hazards and other, more generalised issues that may occur in the workplace.

### *Conclusions*

Protest is a necessity that is required for societies to re-shape and improve themselves.

universities are a place where students should be allowed to critically think and the university respond. The changes and resolutions made in places such as an university often manifest into the rest of society. It is the responsibility of the student and the institution to create interactions between one another, especially during times of protests, that can yield solutions that reshape society for the better.

Health care providers are granted a position whereby the intersections of the biological, the psychological and social are evident therefore, giving us the responsibility to act in a manner that will assist the patients in all these spheres. When protest action is standing to advocate for anything that pertains to the holistic wellbeing of the patients, health sciences students should be making their contributions in protest. It is our obligation to do so. Always balancing the dignity of the current patient and the possible triumph of reshaping the entire health care system for the greater.

‘The first task of the doctor is...political: the struggle against disease must begin with a war against bad government...Man will be totally and definitively cured only if he is first liberated’ -Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*

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