

How should the healthcare community respond to human rights abuses?

The Lancet Editorial, “At the turn of the tide: human rights and health in 2019” (Jan 26, p 295) draws on Human Rights Watch’s 2019 World Report¹ to warn about a range of human rights violations and their impact on health, while also highlighting a new found momentum for resistance to these violations. Thank you for highlighting these issues and for your call to action, namely that resistance to such abuses should continue throughout 2019. While many will agree that we have a role to play in fighting human rights violations, how we can be most effective in putting up such resistance and in pursuing social and political change are far more difficult questions.^{2,3} The pursuit of social and political change is dynamic, it involves a range of actors, contextual and relational factors. The process of change is messy, takes time and is often not linear. The most effective way to respond to human rights abuses will thus be different depending on the issues at hand. We can learn from history and a vast body of research.⁴ One generalisation can be made however, those responsible for human rights abuses are often dismissive or openly hostile toward criticism. Some are even happy to showcase their abuse. This often ensures advocacy, evidence and argument are largely ineffective, limiting what many in the healthcare community have been trained to do. Something more is needed, not just a more sophisticated understanding of politics and social change, but action; rallies, demonstrations and even civil disobedience. If the healthcare community is to contribute to the resistance throughout 2019, it should start with the recognition that business as usual is not enough and that health, justice and human rights often have to be fought for.

References

1. Human Rights Watch. World Report. 2019. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019>
2. Essex R. Health, Social Movements, and Australian Immigration Detention. *American Journal of Public Health*. 2018; 108(5): 614–615.
3. Essex R. Psychology and its Response to Major Human Rights Abuses: The Case of Australian Immigration Detention. *European Psychologist*. In press.
4. Della Porta D. Solidarity Mobilizations in the ‘Refugee Crisis’: Contentious Moves. *Springer*, 2018.