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POSITION PAPER

IOF position on scientists and societies operating in conflict zones

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Abstract
This position paper of the International Osteoporosis Foundation reports the findings of an IOF Commission to consider to recommend rules of partnership with scientists belonging to a country which is currently responsible for an armed conflict, anywhere in the world. The findings and recommendations have been adopted unanimously by the Board of IOF.

Keywords Committee of National Societies · IOF journals · Recommendations · War

Introduction

The International Osteoporosis Foundation (IOF) is truly international. Its major committees are the Committee of National Societies (CNS) and Committee of Scientific Advisors (CSA). The CNS has 335 Society members from 152 countries in all continents, and the CSA has a membership of 168 with a similar geographic spread. In general, IOF has rarely been affected by geopolitical issues. However, on the 26th of April 2023, the International Osteoporosis Foundation (IOF) received a letter from The Board of the Ukrainian Association of Osteoporosis, on behalf of all members of their Association and the Ukrainian nation, calling for the IOF CNS to suspend the membership of the Russian Association on Osteoporosis. The response of IOF was to create a commission to recommend rules of partnership with scientists belonging to a country which is currently responsible for an armed conflict, anywhere in the world. The remit was to consider not only the CNS and CSA but also the position on scientists that contribute to IOF journals (Osteoporosis International, Archives of Osteoporosis and Calcified Tissue International) as authors or board members**.** Members of the commission (the authorship of this manuscript) were chosen to represent the diverse constituencies of the Foundation. The commission presented its findings to the Board of IOF on the 10th of April 2024 at which time its recommendations were unanimously adopted. The present position paper summarises the findings and recommendations of the commission.

General considerations

There are many precedents for an embargo on participation in international events. In the case of Russia for example, the exclusion of athletes representing Russia in sports (UEFA, FIFA and the Olympic committee decided that Russian teams and athletics were not allowed to participate in official competitions as did the rugby and the basketball international associations). In the entertainment arena, Eurovision excluded Russia from the 2023 competition, and some movie producers decided not to present new movies in Russia. In the business arena, Japanese manufacturers of semi-conductors decided not to send any more of this type of material to Russia; Russia was excluded from the SWIFT system, and Mastercard and VISA did not allow transactions involving Russia.

Irrespective of the effects of these sanctions on the Russian government, the general Russian population have felt the effects of the different types of sanctions decided by entities all around the world. For sure, many Russians including scientists do not support the action taken by the Russian Government in Ukraine or its consequences [1]. It is right, therefore, to question whether sanctions punish those who should be punished or merely punish innocent bystanders.

A further consideration is where to draw the line. If scientists from Russia are to be punished because of the war

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in Ukraine, then scientists in other Nations with serious human rights violations and involved in regional wars should also be punished. Countries such as Burkina Faso, Mexico, Myanmar, Nigeria, Palestine, Russia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Ukraine are all currently involved in wars, resulting in more than 5000 deaths in 2023 in each country and many more significant casualties and displacement. More than 50 other conflicts with fewer deaths were extant in 2023 [2–4].

Precedents in the medical and scientific arena

The longest standing academic boycott was that of South African academic institutions and scholars initiated in the 1960s at the request of the African National Congress, with the goal of using such international pressure to force the end to South Africa's system of apartheid. The boycotts were part of a larger international campaign that included political, economic, cultural and sports boycotts. The academic boycotts were lifted in 1990 when apartheid ended [5]. Both during and after the apartheid era, there was debate whether academic boycotts were effective or appropriate. Many considered them to be more a nuisance than an effective agent for change in part because many of the restrictions were easy to get around. Additionally, the sanctions played directly into the hands of those promoting apartheid who wished to isolate academia from the world [6]. Others from South Africa comment that the academic sanctions had no important effect in undermining apartheid and likely had a negative impact on post-apartheid society [7]. Despite the very long boycott, there seems little to be learnt to fashion the future.

There are several other precedents for sanctions on scientists in countries associated with conflict. The British Medical Journal reported in 2003 that several hundred academics had signed a petition that said: "I can no longer in good conscience continue to cooperate with official Israeli institutions, including universities. I will attend no scientific conferences in Israel, and I will not participate as referee in hiring or promotion decisions by Israeli universities, or in the decisions of Israeli funding agencies [8]." This was a protest against the Israeli government's treatment of the Palestinians, and the emphasis is on boycotting institutions rather than individuals. CERN, the European Organization for Nuclear Research halted all new collaborations with institutions and individuals in Russia and Belarus within days of the Russo-Ukraine conflict [9]. Climate change research between Russia and the Arctic Council was suspended in 2022 [10].

In 2022, the editors of the Journal of Molecular Structure decided to ban the manuscripts submitted from scientists working at Russian institutions [11]. The claim was made that the ban was on the Russian institutions and not on scientists. This has been met with near universal condemnation in that Russian institutions will never notice it, while Russian scientists certainly will, and are the only party to suffer. This seems particularly unjust given the many thousand Russian scientists that within days of the conflict, circulated an open letter condemning the senseless offensive and warning of its ramifications for the Russian scientific community and their international collaborations. By February 2022, more than 15,000 of Russian doctors and other healthcare workers had signed an open letter to Vladimir Putin urging him to cease hostilities against Ukraine [12]. In their letter, doctors, nurses and paramedics said that they "strongly oppose the military actions carried out by Russian armed forces on the territory of Ukraine" and called for their president to withdraw troops [13]. A further case of sanctions was the suspension by the European Society of Endocrinology of the affiliated society memberships of the Russian Association of Endocrinologists and the Belarusian Society of Endocrinology. Additionally, the society's journal (European Journal of Endocrinology) suspended editorial positions for Russians and Belarussians [14]. The journal Acta Biochimica Polonica also decided not to accept manuscripts submitted by authors affiliated with Russian institutions [15]. In other circumstances, societies are obliged to follow political dictat. An example close to home is that the Kuwait Osteoporosis Society is banned from academic relationships with Israel by the Kuwaiti government [16].

The vast majority of journals and societies have, however, taken no declared stance on the Ukraine-Russian conflict [17] despite entreaties to the contrary [18]. The IOF, European Neuroendocrinology Association, European Calcified Tissue Society, Endocrine Society, the European Society for Clinical and Economic Aspects of Osteoporosis, Osteoarthritis and Musculoskeletal Diseases (ESCEO) and the American Society of Bone and Mineral Research have not restricted individual membership applications, abstract submission or congress participation from Russia [19].

Several societies and journals have taken a position that opposes boycotts. The British Medical Journal states that it will continue to consider papers for publication from Russian authors and institutions [20]. Its position is based primarily on support for the "universality of science," which is enshrined in the Statutes of the International Council of Science (ICSU: formerly the International Council of Scientific Unions) and explicitly rules out boycotts on the basis of citizenship, gender, religion or colour [21]. The view of the British Medical Journal is that science and health have the potential to bring people together in common purpose to improve understanding, cooperation and relationships. By boycotting Russian research, for example, "we risk further marginalising Russian scientists already speaking for peace.

We also potentially do harm to Russian civilians, many of whom are protesting against the war." [22]

Survey of national societies

The commission undertook a survey of member National Societies of the IOF to determine the position of their membership regarding relationships with scientists and societies from countries currently engaged in an armed conflict. The survey comprised a structured questionnaire with yes/no/undecided responses but with the facility to provide a narrative response to support their answer. The details of the questionnaire are available through the IOF website. The survey held between September 2023 and January 2024 provided responses from 51 national societies from all six IOF regions and included societies from many territories in armed conflict including Israel, Mexico, Palestine, Syria and Ukraine.

The overarching response was that IOF as a scientific organisation should not involve itself in geopolitical issues and remain neutral. The neutrality should extend to both scientists involved with the activities IOF and to membership of the CNS. For example, less than 10% of societies considered that scientists working in a country currently engaged in armed conflict should be barred from submitting papers to IOF journals, occupying editorial board positions or reviewing papers for IOF journals. In the case of societies, only 3 of 49 respondents considered that member societies in a country currently engaged in an armed conflict should be barred from the CNS. An overriding reason for the position was to avoid or minimise any adverse impact on patient care. Societies with an opposing view commented that societies in aggressor nations might be barred. The adoption of these positions was to some extent modified where scientists or societies opposed or supported the armed conflict.

The details of the questionnaire results of the relevant categorical responses and a representation of narrative responses are available on the IOF website [https://www.osteoporosis.foundation/iof-position-scientists-and-societies-operating-conflict-zones].

Limitations to the survey are sample size [23] though responses were evoked from many countries involved in armed conflict (including Israel, Palestine, Russia and Ukraine). Of the 102 countries represented by the CNS, returns were obtained from 35 countries (34%). The return rate was particularly high in North America (67%) and the Middle East (70%).

Discussion

Boycotts and sanctions are common phenomena that result from geopolitical tensions worldwide. There is widespread scepticism about their utility, but this has never acted as a constraint in their use particularly in arms, sport, trade and financial affairs [24]. In contrast, there are relatively few examples of sanctions against scientists or scientific societies in countries involved in armed conflict. There is a long history of the divisive effect of armed conflict on academic alliances that exposes questions with no easy answers. Some scientists feel a sense of outrage but argue that the remit of academia transcends geopolitical boundaries. Others hide behind the dictat of government policy. Yet, others deplore the aggression and feel that keeping business as usual in the face of such events would be morally indefensible. It is argued by Cheng [2022], that the varied views of scientists toward armed conflict emanate from a shared but naïve position: the innocence of the spectator.

Different considerations apply to organisations committed to health. The European Society of Endocrinology is the sole medical society that currently advocates a boycott of Russian Scientists and member societies [14]. Those medical agencies that have published a view do not support the boycotting of scientists or medically based societies [8, 12, 20, 21, 25]. The commission survey of the member societies of IOF aligns with this view. A rationale relates to the Hippocratic oath which states "help, or at least do no harm." or as often incorrectly attributed *Primum non nocere* (First do no harm) [26]. As noted by the British Medical Journal [20], if truth is the first casualty of war, the second is health and well-being.

With this overriding principle in mind, the opinions of individual scientists or societies become less relevant in arriving at a position. The position is negated however where countries, organisations or individuals are involved in unethical medical practice. The sentiment is also reflected in the commission survey that showed a shift in opinion where a society working in a country currently engaged in armed conflict supports directly or indirectly the conflict. Indeed, it is possible to imagine extreme circumstances in which the principle may have to give way to conflicting imperatives, although the threshold to justify this is extremely high. One such imperative might be the debasing of science, as happened in Nazi Germany where the collusion of the scientific or medical community is clear.

Conclusions and recommendations

The recommendations below were approved in full and unanimously by the Board of IOF.

Armed conflict	
1	The commission recommends that IOF condemns all armed conflict since it adversely affects health irrespective of perception of aggressor or defender
Committee of National Societies	
2	The commission recommends, with the proviso below, that IOF does not expel member societies whose countries are involved in armed conflict
3	The commission recommends that IOF boycotts societies complicity in crimes against humanity and when the collusion of the society is clear
4	The commission recommends that IOF does not refuse CNS membership on the basis that their country is involved in armed conflict
Committee of Scientific Advisors and Board of Trustees	
5	The commission recommends that IOF does not ordinarily expel scientific advisors whose countries are involved in armed conflict
6	The commission recommends that IOF does not ordinarily expel board members whose countries are involved in armed conflict
IOF journals	
7	The commission recommends that IOF upholds the position of the Committee of Publication Ethics that decisions to edit and publish should not be determined by the policies of governments or other agencies outside of the journal itself [27]
8	The commission recommends that the journals of IOF do not ordinarily refuse scientific papers because their country of origin is involved in armed conflict
9	The commission recommends that the journals of IOF do not ordinarily expel members of the editorial board because their country of origin is involved in armed conflict
10	The commission recommends that the journals of IOF do not ordinarily ban reviewers of scientific papers because their country of origin is involved in armed conflict
11	The commission recommends that the journals of IOF do not ordinarily ban the appointment of scientific reviewers or membership of the Editorial Boards because their country of origin is involved in armed conflict

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Declarations

Ethics approval This position paper contains no original data and thus issues of ethics, informed consent and patient confidentiality do not apply.

Conflicts of interest None.

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