

Global Call for Free Academic Movement for International Dialogue

The recent meeting of the International Diabetes Federation (IDF), the World Diabetes Congress 2011, took place in Dubai in December 2011. The fact that Dubai was chosen as the venue for this international congress became controversial because it was perceived by some prospective attendees that it might limit participation based on nationality or religion as a result of strict entry laws and/or fear for the security of some participants.

On the other hand, the choice by the IDF was a logical one because of the fact that the Emirates and other countries in the Gulf region have an unusually high frequency of diabetes. In this region, diabetes is epidemic, with approximately 25% of the adult population affected. As a result, the physicians and Ministries of Health had a great need and strong desire to promote prevention and treatment of diabetes and its associated disorders in this region.

The IDF widely publicized that the meeting was open to anyone who wanted to attend and that all would receive permits to enter the country and have their security assured. However, as the date of the meeting approached, it turned out that some Israeli passport holders, not applying via the IDF, were not able to acquire visas to enter Dubai. In addition, there were some technical difficulties on the website which made it difficult to register via the IDF Internet site. It also appears that the Israel Diabetes Association, whose members were most affected by Dubai's usual entry regulations, may not have passed on all the necessary information to potential registrants. And, as the level of the security for Israeli passport holders during their stay in Dubai was unclear, several participants decided to cancel their attendance and some others, not directly affected by the issues, considered boycotting the meeting.

We can cite the experience of one of our Israeli coauthors, Professor Itamar Raz:

As a result of the uncertainty, I was subjected to pressure from key opinion leaders worldwide to cancel my trip to Dubai, and they vowed to follow suit. Similar requests came from individuals in the U.S. and Canada who wanted me not to attend the meeting. Others suggested

that I make the trip as long as I was not concerned for my personal safety.

After receiving assurances from the Israel Foreign Ministry that there was no danger to my personal security and when I understood that some of the trouble with participants not receiving entry to Dubai was bureaucratic (that could have been avoided with forethought), I made a final decision to attend.

Part of my reasoning was that the IDF meeting had great significance for the health of the Emirate public, and if I decided not to attend this would have been viewed as a "boycott" and many other speakers that were vital for the success of the meeting would also have cancelled.

My final decision obviously was controversial and drew a lot of criticism from my closest colleagues and friends, some of whom are world-wide leaders in diabetes research.

In retrospect, the World Diabetes Congress meeting was excellent, the Dubai hospitality was outstanding, and as a direct result of Professor Raz's attendance, a resident of Dubai has recently come to Israel to participate in an international diabetes prevention study that he is leading. The fact that the hosts and the participants were able to overcome political differences and meet each other on common ground has had only positive outcomes and stands as an exemplar for those who believe that grass roots communication is the best way to tackle issues of global concern and begin to break down barriers.

But, the dilemma of whether to participate in the meeting versus the need for academic freedom has brought us to the realization that we who believe in the respect for people and their freedom and primarily the value of contributing to better health need to assure a future free from academic boycotts.

The experiences relating to the World Diabetes Congress can be potentially mirrored in other countries and for future congresses. As scientists and academics, we need to raise this flag because there is faint chance that politicians will. We need to find the way to spread and share medical and scientific knowledge to all corners of the earth without regards for the politics of the leaders.

There is an urgent need to find ways to bypass bureaucratic obstacles and not take the easier way out with boycotts which, in the end, harm us all. Every academic should be given equal opportunity independent of ethnic origin or country of residence.

Similar experiences of difficulties with entry to countries have occurred in the world of sport with boycotts of athletes in various sporting events because of their country of origin. We have seen universities, in theory seats of academic freedom, urge boycotts because of religion or national politics. And now the arts world is facing the same threat. This is part of the same disease that we wish to eradicate. It encourages separatism that hardens attitudes and encourages each side to demonize the other. In contrast, at academic meetings that representatives from these same "boycotting" countries attend, close contacts and friendships can and have been made. We must find a way to encourage these scenarios and even try to influence these relationships in other areas as well. The Nobel Prize should be our guiding light. This coveted prize is awarded to people who have made landmark breakthroughs in improving the lives of people. The prize is awarded without regard to who the person is, rather as a reward for his/her actions.

The ideal would be to guarantee equal rights regardless of race, color, or religion—as well as equal protection under the law for all law abiding citizens. This is the mantra we need to follow in order to guarantee academic freedom for all. Science and knowledge should be allowed to flow seamlessly across borders.

In future, where boycotts and ostracisations threaten, we should use the easy-access Internet to transmit information and make joint decisions in any situation where a threat of boycott exists and search for positive solutions in order to reach our goals.

Finally, it is important to state again the success of the Dubai IDF meeting and the wonderful hospitality extended. It is also important to note that the 1st American Diabetes Association Middle

East Congress will be held at the Dubai International Convention and Exhibition Centre in Dubai, 4–6 December 2012. In this regard, let us end with the words of Shimon Peres, Israel's Nobel Peace Prize-winning President, who said in 1996:

... in a changing world the sources of strength and wealth were no longer national or geographical. They are totally of the intellectual capacity of a nation—the level of science and technology. Now all those elements do not have borders. Science doesn't need a visa to travel from one country to another. And technology doesn't go through the customs. It flows around.

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