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15 years of cooperation in research and higher education between the Faculty of Medicine, University of Oslo, and Palestinian institutions



Espen Bjertness, Khaldoun Nijem, Abdullatif Hussein, Rita Giacaman, Gerd Holmboe-Ottesen, Petter Kristensen

Abstract

Background In 1994, a delegation organised by the Council for Higher Education, occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), and the University of Oslo, Norway, resulted in continued (1995–2009) cooperation between the Department of General Practice and Community Medicine, University of Oslo, Institute of Community and Public Health (ICPH), Birzeit University, and Hebron University. Funding support reached NOK13 459 000 (US\$2 224 000) for running costs and scholarships. We discuss the cooperation and the contribution to health equity in oPt, and suggest ways forward for continued cooperation. Webappendix gives supplementary information.

Methods Research and training were about public health and occupational health challenges in oPt, with epidemiological research methods as a fundamental component of public health research. We applied the principles of action presented by WHO Commission on Social Determinants of Health to discuss a possible contribution to health equity in oPt.

Findings The main cooperation resulted in training of 11 Palestinian PhD students, nine Masters students, and more than 250 Palestinian and Norwegian researchers; publication of more than 40 scientific articles and 21 reports written by Norwegian exchange students; and creation of sustainable centres for Occupational Epidemiology (Hebron University) and Epidemiology (Birzeit University). One of the most important achievements in Palestinian science was the publication of five reports from the ICPH in *The Lancet* 2009 Series Health in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. This Series showed that Palestinian right to health was compromised because of Israeli occupation (squeezed economy, movement restrictions, spread of fear, uncertainty, insecurity), and confirmed adverse health effects due to occupation and systematic and avoidable differences in health implying health inequity. Our contribution to health equity includes: measure of occurrence of health problems and associated factors; expansion of knowledge base; development of a workforce trained in social determinants of health; and enhanced public awareness of these determinants.

Interpretation Gradual postgraduate training of staff at Hebron and Birzeit universities secured the ability to produce valid research for policy formulation and planning, and achieved legitimacy locally. This cooperation has been sustained over years, with academic support, engaging staff at all levels, both in the oPt and in Norway. Further support to Palestinian institutions by education of new PhD candidates is needed. Two staff trained at PhD level from the present cooperation have moved abroad. One important way to reduce brain drain is to provide investigators with time to undertake research, which would, however, demand commitments from universities and from the Palestinian Ministry of Education. Research in the next cooperation phases should expand medical, occupational, and public health research to strengthen local knowledge to solve local problems. This effort includes assessment of interventions, which was extensively discussed in *The Lancet* 2009 Series, and focus on social determinants of health, as recommended by WHO. ICPH operates a Master programme in public health. Through continued cooperation with University of Oslo, ICPH will probably soon develop a PhD programme, perhaps with a shared degree between Birzeit University and University of Oslo. Development of a new Master programme in public health and foreign policy at University of Oslo should also be considered and could attract the best students and teachers recruited from low-income, high-income, and conflict-ridden countries. The programme could bridge the gap between global health efforts and the economic, political, and national security contexts in which policy is formulated and implemented.

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Contributors

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Conflicts of interest

We declare that we have no conflicts of interest.

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See Online for webappendix

See *Lancet* Series Health in the Occupied Palestinian Territory

Section for Preventive Medicine and Epidemiology, Department of General Practice and Community Medicine, Institute of Health and Society, Faculty of Medicine, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway (Prof E Bjertness PhD, Prof G Holmboe-Ottesen PhD, Prof P Kristensen MD); Tibet University Medical College, Lhasa, Tibet, China (Prof E Bjertness); Occupational Epidemiology and Biological Research Laboratory, Department of Biology, Hebron University, West Bank, occupied Palestinian territory (K Nijem PhD); Institute of Community and Public Health, Birzeit University, West Bank, occupied Palestinian territory (A Hussein PhD, Prof R Giacaman PharmD); and National Institute of Occupational Health, Department of Occupational Medicine and Epidemiology, Oslo, Norway (Prof P Kristensen)

Correspondence to: Prof Espen Bjertness, Department of General Practice and Community Medicine, University of Oslo, PO Box 1130 Blindern, 0318 Oslo, Norway espen.bjertness@medisin.uio.no