Is Medicine a Pacifist Vocation or Should Doctors Help Build Bombs?\textsuperscript{1}

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1 Introduction

Ever since World War I, pacifists have found refuge in medicine. What is it about medicine that is so alluring to those who make nonviolence their creed? And, if pacifists are drawn to medicine in time of war, perhaps medicine has a natural affinity for pacifism? Is medicine a pacifist profession? Must doctors always avoid harming others or may they help build bombs?

Historically, weapons technology asked little of medicine so that military surgeons could ignore both questions and adhere to their “vocational pacifism” without seriously affecting military capabilities. But modern warfare is quickly forcing changes. Increasingly, military and political leaders are turning to a range of weapons, some lethal and some non-lethal, that require the knowledge peculiar to the practice of medicine. Medicine may shun weapons development, as many might prefer, but only by embracing pacifism. Pacifism, however, is not a doctrine that medicine can support with any degree of cogency or enthusiasm. As a result, the medical community must seriously ask itself whether it may take up arms in its professional capacity and use medical expertise to build weapons that harm others. Briefly addressed by the Red Cross in 1996, questions about “the medical profession and the effects of weapons” were soon set aside and remain unanswered.\textsuperscript{2}

2 Pacifism and Medicine: The Appeal of Noncombatant Military Medical Service

It is difficult to distance pacifism from medicine. When American Quaker pacifists faced conscription in 1917, their first thought was to establish an ambulance unit modeled on the Friends Ambulance Unit that Quakers had operated with great

\textsuperscript{1}This chapter is adapted from Michael L. Gross, Bioethics and Armed Conflict: Moral Dilemmas of Medicine and War (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2006), Chapters 8 and 9. Used with permission.

\textsuperscript{2}International Committee of the Red Cross, “The Medical Profession and the Effects of Weapons,” (Geneva: International Committee of the Red Cross), publication ref. 0668, 1996.
success in Britain since the beginning of the war. Warming rapidly to the idea, Adventist pacifists launched the Cadet Medical Corps prior to America’s entry into World War II to allow young Adventists to fulfill their civic duty without violating the biblical precept that absolutely forbids killing. Nor was the idea lost upon policy makers. Making room for conscripts who cannot, by reason of conscience, bear arms and serve in any capacity that might compel them to kill or harm others, military officials are, to this day, prepared to offer conscientious objectors “service in the medical department of any of the Armed Forces, wherever performed.”

Two core beliefs characterize pacifism:
1. Anti-war-ism: The belief that war is absolutely wrong
2. Nonmaleficence: The belief that one “cannot conscientiously engage in any activity or perform any function contributing to the destruction of human life”

These are two distinct principles. The first espouses an unconditional opposition to war in any form, the second to the role one must play during armed conflict. Individuals weigh these principles differently. Refusing to compromise on either principle, some pacifists suffer imprisonment, while the vast majority of “absolute” pacifists during World War II, for example, chose alternative public service to work in civilian agricultural camps and perform essential national service without joining and supporting the military. Others, however, were willing to compromise in the face of German aggression and sought ways to fulfill their military and moral duties simultaneously. They would support war but practice nonmaleficence. In doing so, they chose noncombatant military service and in nearly every case this translated into medical service in the US Army’s Medical Department, the Royal Army Medical Corp or the Friends Ambulance Unit.

The obvious appeal lies in the symmetry between the nonmaleficence of pacifism and the nonmaleficence of medicine. As some pacifists set aside their anti-war-ism, they considered themselves “conscientious supporters” of war. They would back their nation’s war effort but refuse to bear arms. It is a strange and marginal worldview but astonishingly close to one typically associated with the practice of medicine during armed conflict. Consider the following testimony:

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3 US Department of Defense, Conscientious Objectors (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, Directive Number 1300.6, August 20, 1971, certified as current, November 21, 2003), paragraph 3.3 (“Non-combatant service”). In World War I and the beginning of World War II, noncombatant military service included service in the medical, quartermaster, and engineering corps. In January 1943, noncombatant military service was restricted exclusively to the medical department.


5 Rufus D. Bowman, The Church of the Brethren and War 1708–1941 (Elgin, IL: Brethren Publishing House, 1944), 208. The Church of the Brethren declared these beliefs in January 1918. However, they also typify the pacifism associated with the Mennonites and Quakers. See Peter Brock and Nigel Young, Pacifism in the Twentieth Century (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999); Cynthia Eller, Conscientious Objectors and the Second World War: Moral and Religious Arguments in Support of Pacifism (New York: Praeger, 1991).