

# “ Mind the Gap: Continuing Medical Education with Total Infrastructure Destruction.”

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**GAZA’S TWO MEDICAL SCHOOLS HAVE BEEN DESTROYED, FACULTY AND STUDENTS KILLED OR DISPLACED, AND THE HEALTHCARE AND EDUCATION SYSTEM SUFFERED CATASTROPHIC DAMAGE. HOW CAN CURRENT MEDICAL STUDENTS AND TRAINEES BE AIDED IN COMPLETING THEIR EDUCATION DURING THIS CRISIS? THIS LETTER TO THE EDITOR SUGGESTS SOME SOLUTIONS.**

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Dear Editor-in-Chief,

As physicians invested in the upliftment of the next generation joining this profession, we are writing to highlight the plight of Gazan medical students. The challenges they face are numerous and detrimental to their medical pursuit even prior to the beginning of the current Israeli military assault due to Israeli occupation, blockade, and prior wars. One day soon, a ceasefire will be called, and Gazan medical students who have managed to survive this calamity will be left with decisions and questions on how they may continue their medical career journey, which had abruptly halted.

Prior to October 7th, there were two medical schools in Gaza - Islamic University of Gaza (IUG) and Al-Azhar University with approximately 1830 students (1). Medical students faced significant hardship due to the blockade in Gaza, causing economic difficulties, movement restrictions, and a dearth of opportunities to pursue medical specialty training within Gaza. Medical training in Gaza was costly, and many talented medical students were forced to pause or completely abandon their medical training because of their inability

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to pay tuition fees. Those fortunate enough to complete their medical training found significant difficulty obtaining employment post-graduation, with high unemployment among qualified medical professionals (2).

Since October 7th, the latest estimates specific to medical students from Nov 9th indicate that at least 11 medical students have been killed by Israeli forces, with multiple students unaccounted for and many injured. (3) These numbers are most probably higher now. Several physician faculty members have also been killed or injured by Israeli forces due to airstrikes and targeted gunfire. Both IUG and Al-Al-Azhar University were bombed and destroyed, along with all other major universities in Gaza (4, 5). As of writing, the university president of IUG has been killed (6). Medical students, many of whom are displaced, have lost access to important documents such as transcripts and registration certificates. There are 5000 Gazan college students studying outside of Gaza who are cut off from all financial support(7).

The destruction of universities and hospitals and the targeting of professionals such as physicians and educators impairs Palestinian society and thwarts recovery efforts(8). Reconstructing society after the turmoil endured will be an arduous undertaking and a long road. The broader global medical profession, medical institutions, international education sectors, and government can significantly contribute to aiding Gazan medical students and better redevelopment through a purposeful, strategic, and resolute response.

A catastrophic and unprecedented disaster has occurred, with limited research data to suggest evidence-based solutions. Any response to assist Gazan health professional students will require significant investment to support their psychological needs as a result of the trauma experienced (9). Damage assessment and the resumption of communication channels are of utmost importance in determining suitable solutions. Understanding that there must remain a global focus on achieving an immediate cease-fire, we must also support students in resuming their medical education. Some students may be unable to retrieve grades or degrees if the servers holding their data are destroyed. This possibility must not be overlooked, and proper procedures for approaching students who have received training without the ability to showcase their achievements or obtain references must be established through alternative mechanisms of validation, such as administering content-focused exams.

Rebuilding Gaza will take decades and will require considerable international aid. The bridge in education while reestablishing institutions requires creative thinking in terms of virtual or blended learning with other universities, such as those in the West Bank and globally. Medical schools can consider accepting Gazan students to complete their degrees at universities that have established relationships with Gazan institutions through twinning programs or otherwise (10). Alternatively, medical schools without existing relationships can accept students as domestic students, as demonstrated by Egypt's acceptance of war-displaced Syrian medical students (11). Many of the students will require scholarships and financial aid that can be financed through governments and organizations.

As for postgraduate medical training, medical residencies and short-term fellowships should emphasize accepting qualified physicians from Gaza to their training programs, particularly in specialties critical to the needs of people in Gaza. Creative approaches to teaching can include a training component in Gaza so that the curriculum is tailored to local needs.

We as a medical community should explore all possible solutions to ensure that this generation and future generations of Palestinian physicians have every chance to reach their aspirations and are better positioned to rehabilitate Gazan civil society from the destruction that has taken place.

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