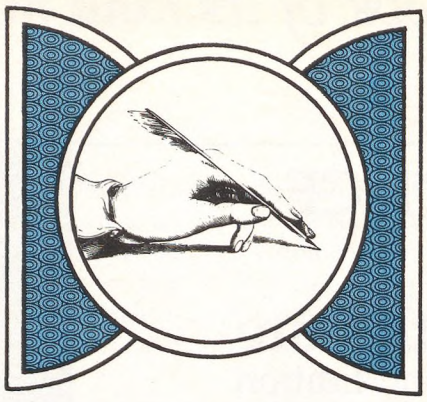
Letters to the Editor

The Journal welcomes Letters to the Editor; if found suitable, they will be published as space allows. Letters should be typed double-spaced, should not exceed 400 words, and are subject to abridgment and other editorial changes in accordance with journal style.



Health Care in Nicaragua

To the Editor:

We returned from Nicaragua as part of the largest delegation of US health care workers ever to visit that country. While attending the Second US-Nicaragua Colloqium on Health, we were impressed by the significant, well-documented progress made in providing health care since the overthrow of Somoza's dictatorship in 1979.

Infant diarrhea was responsible five years ago for killing children at the rate of 120/1,000 live births; today, by setting up oral rehydration centers, Nicaragua has cut this toll to 58/1,000. Poliomyelitis has been virtually eliminated, and incidences of tetanus, diptheria, whooping cough, and malaria have been vastly reduced. Malnutrition is being corrected by assuring an adequate diet to every family, and vaccination campaigns have conquered the most serious contagious diseases. Psychiatric patients, instead of imprisonment and torture, instead of electric shock therapy administered by cattle prods, now received team-centered family and group therapy and progressive outpatient care.

Yet, this progress is seriously threatened by the covert war being conducted by US proxies on Nicaraguan borders. The Contra guerrillas select health workers and installations as special targets of their violence: 38 health posts have been destroyed, 100 health workers, including two physicians, have been murdered; others have been tortured and raped. Health workers in the immunization campaigns in the north are now forced to go into the countryside with their supplies under one arm and a rifle under the other. Progress in malaria control has been significantly slowed; malnutrition in contested areas is worsening as Contras disrupt the food supply and destroy crops. One hospital in Jenatega, near the contested area, has trouble maintaining an operating room schedule—its water supply is polluted, and the trip to a nearby source of clean water has become too dangerous, so the operating room laundry cannot be done. This is to say nothing of the added burden on the health system caused by injuries associated with 7,000 deaths, of stress and grief in a country unable to obtain sufficient medical supplies because of a US economic blockade.

Nicaragua is a poor country of 3 million. Its people, now struggling to make a decent life for themselves, pose no threat to us. By continuing to support aggression against them, we debase our principles and dishonor our own struggle for a decent life.

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