

IPPNW-Kongress: „Medizin und Gewissen –Gesundheitswesen, Menschenrechte, Medizingeschichte“ Erlangen, Universität Nürnberg-Erlangen, 14. und 15 Oktober 2011



Laudatio on the occasion of the conferral of the 2011 International Medical Peace Award to Prof. Dr Sebnem Korur Fincanci, Erlangen, 14 October 2011

Matthew Happold

Thank you. I'm very happy to be here this evening to celebrate the award of the International Medical Peace Work Award to Prof. Dr Sebnem Korur Fincanci. I have to admit, however: I'm not sure of my qualifications to stand before you today. It's true that I'm a doctor but, with a PhD in law, as my mother says, I'm not the sort of doctor that does anyone any good.

The International Medical Peace Award is intended to support the work of health care workers in the prevention of violence and the promotion of peace and to strengthen health professionals within their positive and particular contribution to peace building, violence prevention and conflict transformation. In her work as doctor, scientist and teacher, and through her courage and achievements, Dr Fincanci has demonstrated sustained commitment to these aims. She is worthy recipient of the International Medical Peace Award on this, the first, occasion that the Award has been made.

As a forensic medicine specialist and human rights campaigner for human rights,, Dr Fincanci has been at the forefront of efforts to end torture and to care for torture survivors in Turkey and, indeed, internationally. Torture and ill-treatment have been endemic in Turkey, particularly since the 1980 military coup. It has been utilised systemically by the security forces against members of leftist groups and Kurdish separatists, but also against criminal suspects and, indeed, potentially anyone finding themselves in detention. It has been used not only to elicit information and confessions but also to intimidate and terrorise; as a brutal form of social control. Instances of torture occurring today seem to be less than previously but once the practice of torture becomes imbedded in an organisation it is very difficult to eradicate its use. The involvement of medical professionals is crucial both in documenting the use of torture and in treating those subjected to it.

Dr Fincanci is a professor at the medical faculty of Istanbul University and was formerly head of the department of forensic medicine. She was also previously head of the State Forensic Medicine Institute, where her tenure was not uncontroversial, being several times sanctioned for her activities when they proved embarrassing to the authorities.

Since its foundation in 1990, Dr Fincanci has worked with the Human Rights Foundation of Turkey, and she is currently the organisation's president. The Human Rights Foundation of Turkey provides medical, psychological and social assistance to torture

IPPNW-Kongress: „Medizin und Gewissen –Gesundheitswesen, Menschenrechte, Medizingeschichte“ Erlangen, Universität Nürnberg-Erlangen, 14. und 15 Oktober 2011



survivors and documents human rights violations in Turkey. It presently runs treatment and rehabilitation centres in five Turkish cities. Over its 20 plus years of existence, it has responded to over 12,000 individual applications (itself only a small fraction of what the organisation considers the one million torture survivors in Turkey since 1980). The Human Rights Foundation of Turkey is internationally respected for its professionalism and dedication to the eradication of torture and the care of torture survivors, and has received numerous international awards for its work.

The Human Rights Foundation of Turkey was one of the lead organisations and Dr Fincanci one of the lead drafters of the Istanbul Protocol, so called because it was adopted in that city in 2004. Published as an official document by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Istanbul Protocol - properly titled the Manuel on the Effective Investigation and Documentation of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment – was drafted with input from a range of collaborating organisations of forensic scientists, physicians, psychologists, human rights monitors and lawyers. It provides guidelines for the investigation and documentation of torture, so as to provide more effective protection to individuals and to help hold torturers responsible for their actions. For given that torture usually takes place behind closed doors, absent the deployment of medical evidence the victim stands alone against the might of the State in seeking to assert his or her claim.

As well as standard-setting, Dr Fincanci has been active in dissemination. With the Turkish Medical Association, she established a training course for general medical practioneres, seeking to empower them to identify and document instances of torture. Over 3,500 general practitioners have now undertaken the course. Dr Fincanci also travels extensively to give training, in particular on the Istanbul Protocol, something you will have an opportunity to discover tomorrow..

As a 'reward' for her activities, Dr Fincanci has suffered persistent harrassment from the Turkish authorities. When I visited her in Istanbul last year, it was to observe proceedings brought against her from criminal libel in relation to comments she had made to the press concerning the head of the third section of the Forensic Medicine Institute, a doctor who had been promoted to that position despite (or, perhaps, because) of a history of malpractice, for which she had been sanctioned by the Turkish Medical Association. Dr Fincanci was remarkably sanguine about the proceedings, themselves only one of five such proesuctions she was then facing, and I'm pleased to say that she was acquitted by the Turkish courts last month. Nonetheless, the bringing of such prosecutions as regards expert commentary on what are plainly issues of public importance is entirely inappropriate, and can be seen only as attempts to distract and wear down their targets.

IPPNW-Kongress: „Medizin und Gewissen –Gesundheitswesen, Menschenrechte, Medizingeschichte“ Erlangen, Universität Nürnberg-Erlangen, 14. und 15 Oktober 2011



Dr Fincanci, however, has refused to be discouraged. Indeed, in the short time I have I can only give highlights of her career and must restrict myself to simply mentioning her long involvement in the Turkish Medical Association (of which she has served as general secretary on two occasions); her work in Bosnia-Herzegovina for the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia; her service on the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims; and her role as one of the drafters of the Istanbul Statement on the Use and Effect of Solitary Confinement, adopted at the International Psychological Trauma Symposium in Istanbul in 2007. Indeed, these too are only examples.

The struggle to end torture and to hold those responsible for its use accountable as been a long one. It has had its successes and its failures (not least because, as monitors become more active, so torturers learn better to conceal their handiwork) , but there can be few more important tasks. A society where the State considers it can inflict pain gratuitously and without consequences on its people cannot be considered a just or a peaceful society. Medical professionals play a crucial role in the struggle against torture; not only in caring for the victims, but in documenting torture and providing the evidence to bring those responsible to justice. And there can be few who have made a greater contribution than Dr Fincanci. Her zeal, professionalism and persistence are an example to all those working to prevent violence and promote peace, and it is for that reason that she has been chosen as the first recipient of the International Medical Peace Award.