

Politics, environment, and health

Enrique Barros: *I have been following The Lancet's family of journals, which are getting more and more explicit about social and democratic processes as central to health. It seems the times are calling us to be bold and clever. Can you articulate the role of politics, and whether it would be possible to introduce it without disrupting the clinical and scientific focus of our Working Party?*

Seiji Yamada : While our Working Party's concerns about health and the environment are global and transnational – the saying goes, “All politics is local,” so I will mostly focus on the local level. Firstly, let me mention that while I was born in Hiroshima and therefore have a Japanese name and look phenotypically Japanese, I grew up in a suburb of Chicago, and I moved to Hawai'i as an adult. Having traveled to the Marshall Islands for medical work starting ~20 years ago, my concerns about the environment partially stem from observing the environmental destruction and the ensuing health consequences of nuclear weapons and other weapon system testing there. More recently, it has become evident that with a mean elevation above sea level of 2m, the Marshall Islands is particularly vulnerable to sea level rise.

The people of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands included, are migrating to Guam, Hawai'i, and the continental U.S. for health care, jobs, and education for their children. Increasingly, they are migrating because of climate change. Although Micronesia has been a strategic asset of the U.S. since WWII, the people from the Compact nations (the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, and Palau) are classified as “non-qualified aliens” in the U.S. If they were U.S. citizens, many would qualify for federally and state-funded Medicaid, health insurance for the impoverished. As “non-qualified aliens,” they do not.

A portion of my own involvement in the political sphere has been to write and speak about the denial of the human right to health care for Micronesians in Hawai'i. To this end, I have written about the history of nuclear testing, what we know about its ecological, social, and health consequences, and about the injustice of denying health care. My writings were referenced, and I provided testimony in the ultimately unsuccessful court battle for health care access for migrants.

I believe that my contributions to Pacific Island health literature are clinically and scientifically sound. They are based on my own clinical practice, which I have tried to carry out in an evidence-based manner. I believe that my assessment of the proximal structural antecedents of the disease patterns are sound as well. For example, attributing the high prevalence of diabetes in a place such as Ebeye Island in the Marshall Islands to the lack of space to grow traditional foodstuffs and dependence on imported foods of low nutritional value is uncontroversial.

Also uncontroversial is the historical record. With the U.S.'s rise as an imperial power, it took control over Hawai'i (1893), the Philippines and Guam (1898), and rest of Micronesia (with WWII, 1941-1945) for its own strategic and economic ends.

Fast forward to the present: Incredibly, much of the Republican Party, the party in power in the U.S., professes to deny the science of climate change. Thus, environmental standards for clean air and water are abandoned, nature is turned over to corporate exploitation, drilling and fracking for fossil fuel continues apace, and oil companies' profits are enhanced. President Trump's initial cabinet, composed of generals and Goldman Sachs alumni, with the former CEO of Exxon-Mobil as the Secretary of State – underscored how the military, Wall Street, and the oil industry are really in charge.

While the denial of health access to Micronesians pales in comparison to the abuses (e.g. separating children from their parents) that take place at the southern border of the U.S. – it is important to place the Micronesian situation in the context of the national political debate about borders, migration, and human rights.

When I draw connections between the material conditions of the Marshallese people to the large-scale historical forces such as colonialism, imperialism, militarism, or racism – my assertions are viewed as “political.” Indeed, I do not dispute that they are. I make value judgements. I am counterposing and prioritizing the value of human health and human rights over profits. I prioritize peace over war. I prioritize equality over racial hierarchies.

Are my political views, colored by my ideological commitments? I am drawing a distinction between political engagement and ideology here. I cannot deny that I view the world through ideological lenses that are historically materialist. I am also deeply committed to freedom. My understanding of imperialism is shaped by the history of Imperial Japan. I think that [Marx](#) was right about a lot of things. I think that [Rosa Luxemburg](#) and [Emma Goldman](#) were right about a lot of things. I think that [Noam Chomsky](#) is right about practically everything. Richard Horton, The Lancet chief editor, can get away with saying such things. I get exiled from my department of family practice. (I am back after re-education.) But now there are [American politicians](#) who utter the word “socialism.”

To the degree that I have some local knowledge about the health of Micronesians, I have been trying to influence local public opinion through the lay press, writing [as a clinician](#) in favor of the human right to health, as well as from a more [explicitly political perspective](#) analyzing why policymakers choose to deny health access. I seek to turn us [away from militarism and toward peace](#), and I encourage reflection on [the place of Hawai'i in the ecology of the future](#).

As a U.S. citizen, to the degree that I retain some right to free speech and to the degree that the trappings of democracy remain - I have some miniscule say in the future of this nation-state. I feel that it is my duty to work for a future in which health, human rights, equality, peace, and the environment are valued. That is why I believe in the necessity of political engagement.