

**A Travesty of Justice and Medicine:
Health Workers in Libya Wrongfully Blamed for Spread of HIV**

**Statement Signed by Leading HIV Experts
Dec. 19, 2006**

On December 19, a Libyan court unjustly convicted and sentenced to death five Bulgarian nurses --Valya Cherveniyashka, Snezhanka Dimitrova, Nasya Nenova, Valentina Siropulo, and Kristiana Valcheva--and a Palestinian physician -- Ashraf Ahmad Jum'a-- for “intentionally infecting” hundreds of children with HIV in Al-Fateh hospital in Benghazi, Libya. At the trial, pivotal scientific evidence was rejected for consideration by the prosecution and judge. The nurses confessed to the crimes under torture. The accused have been imprisoned by the Libyan government for nearly eight years.

Repeated scientific studies, including a new study published recently in the highly respected peer-review journal *Nature*, indicate that a strain of HIV was spreading among the children before the accused nurses and doctor began working at the hospital. The evidence shows that the children were likely infected through the re-use of infected medical instruments and supplies, a frequent conduit of HIV in hospitals that fail to follow so-called "universal precautions." Many countries, such as China, Romania, and Kazakastan, have also experienced widespread accidental HIV infection due to reused medical equipment that was not sterilized. Many have provided life-saving funding and technical support for medical safety programs in various regions that seek to address these types of problems; even more attention is needed.

For this case in Libya, we call upon the Libyan government to release these scapegoated health workers and on other governments to exert all possible influence on the Libyan authorities to do so. We are sensitive to the suffering of the infected children and their families, and we call upon the Libyan government and others to ensure that the children will continue to receive high-quality medical care. However, blaming the health workers for the infection of the children will not reverse the infections. Rather, it will turn a blind eye towards the real cause the problem -inadequate and unsafe medical systems, equipment, and procedures- and will simultaneously prolong the suffering of the health workers.

We are practitioners of science and medicine, and through that lens we are deeply troubled by the fact that scientific evidence has been ignored, and that our colleagues in health care have been seriously mistreated and denied access to due process. But we are also concerned with justice and human rights. Through that lens, too, we see no other fair outcome of this case than the immediate release of the nurses and physician in addition to the on-going treatment of the children.

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