

## Reed Elsevier and the arms trade revisited

The Royal College of Physicians is gravely concerned that the publishers of *The Lancet*, Reed Elsevier, continue to be commercially involved in the promotion and sale of arms through trade fairs, and calls on them to divest themselves of such interests. *The Lancet* is one of the most respected international medical journals and should not be linked to an industry involved in weapons designed to cause physical harm and death, and often used against civilians. This involvement represents a conflict of interest that threatens the reputation of *The Lancet* and undermines its role in improving health and health care worldwide.

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We would like to express our concern that the publishers of *The Lancet*, Reed Elsevier, are continuing to promote the use of arms by hosting arms trade fairs. The recent Shooting, Hunting, and Outdoor Trade (SHOT) Show<sup>1</sup> hosted by Reed Exhibitions was devoted to the glorification of guns; shortly the company is to host an arms fair to the Middle East at a time when the region is the focus of international tension. In the past, manufacturers of cluster bombs have been allowed to participate in such events<sup>2</sup> despite the indiscriminate effect of cluster bombs on civilian and military populations. Although we do not question the right of nations to arm themselves appropriately against potentially hostile threats, much of the trade connected with arms does not fulfil this purpose.

Global expenditure on arms is now over US\$1 trillion per year,<sup>3</sup> amounting to around 2.5% of global gross domestic product. It consumes limited resources which could help fund sectors such as health and

education and support productive economic activities. Many arms end up in the poorest countries where they contribute to the breakdown of law and order and undermine governance. Although precise estimates of the deaths from arms are not available, it has been suggested that around 500 000 people die every year as a result of firearms.<sup>4</sup> Most are innocent civilians caught up in conflict or crime.

In view of the major contribution of arms trading to the undermining of public health and international development, we wish to add our support to the courageous stand taken by *The Lancet* in asking Reed Elsevier to divest itself from these unsavoury activities.<sup>2</sup> We note that the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust has recently sold all its shares in Reed Elsevier after 3 years of critical engagement on the company's role in the arms trade. We hope that other shareholders will continue to raise these concerns, and we look forward to a public response from the company.

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- 1 The 2007 SHOT Show. <http://www.shotshow.org/App/homepage.cfm?moduleid=1968&apnname=100300>.
- 2 The Lancet and The Lancet Editorial Advisory Board. Reed Elsevier and the arms trade. *Lancet* 2005; **366**: 868.

- 3 Stålenheim P, Fruchart D, Omitoogun W, Perdomo C. Military expenditure, chapter 8. SIPRI Yearbook 2006: armaments, disarmament and international security. Oxford University Press on behalf of Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2006.

- 4 Arya N. Confronting the small arms pandemic. *BMJ* 2002; **324**: 990–91.

*The Lancet* has a distinguished track record of drawing attention to the consequences of war and violence. Yet its publisher, Reed Elsevier, has a subsidiary that hosts one of the largest military exhibitions in the world (Defence Systems and Equipment International [DSEi]).

Reed Elsevier does not need *The Lancet* to highlight its inconsistencies. It is a signatory of the UN Global Compact<sup>1</sup> which includes a commitment to “the rights to life, liberty and security”. Reed Elsevier’s “Socially Responsible Supplier Group”<sup>2</sup> includes a “comprehensive environmental survey” but I could not find any reference to the collateral damage of cluster munitions, although there were an estimated 15 cluster bomb manufacturers at the last DSEi in 2005.

The issue is not about the availability of weapons, which is a wider debate. The issue is that weapons of dubious legality are being sold in a market atmosphere to rival “the top shows worldwide” so that “the cross-fertilization of business”<sup>3</sup> can take place and massive profits can be made. This is not the way to ensure the human security of any of the world’s citizens.

The marketplace is changing and business and government are gradually being held more accountable. Reed Elsevier could show true corporate responsibility by anticipating these trends and disposing of all interests that threaten human—and especially civilian—life and wellbeing. If not, we have to urge *The Lancet* to find another publisher, and Reed Elsevier’s shareholders to examine their investments.

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Submissions should be made via our electronic submission system at <http://ees.elsevier.com/thelancet/>



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- 1 United Nations Global Compact. <http://www.unglobalcompact.org/> (accessed March 5, 2007).
- 2 Reed Elsevier Socially Responsible Supplier (SRS) Group. <http://www.reed-elsevier.com/media/pdf/n/6/SRS%20Group.pdf> (accessed March 15, 2007).
- 3 Reed Exhibitions Aerospace and Defence Group. Defence Systems and Equipment International 2007: the world's most prestigious defence exhibition. <http://www.dsei.co.uk/exhibitors/DSEI07Brochure.pdf> (accessed March 7, 2007).



*The Lancet*, as the foremost medical journal on global health issues, engages with all threats to human longevity or mental and physical wellbeing. As a result, its editorial and scientific content frequently becomes required reading for governments, transnational companies, and the UN, in addition to its bread and butter clientele of health professionals, patients, and international news media.

It is thus shocking to hear that the publisher of *The Lancet*, Reed Elsevier, continues to align itself so supportively with the arms trade, the products of which directly generate massive civilian mortality and suffering and prop up regimes that commit gross violations of international human rights law. Exhibitors at an arms fair in 2006 run by the Reed Elsevier's subsidiary company, Reed Exhibitions, included manufacturers of electroshock batons, stun guns, and stun belts, which are banned by the EU because their use amounts to torture and other cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment.

*The Lancet's* traditionally progressive stance on medicine and health is a priceless global resource and its reputation must not be compromised by an association with products so manifestly harmful to mankind.

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2 years ago your Editorial staff and International Advisory Board took the courageous and correct step to criticise the practices of your parent company, Reed Elsevier, in the hosting of arms trade fairs.<sup>1</sup>

The arms trade industry as it stands has little good to say for itself. It encourages transgressions of the various Geneva Conventions on the conduct of war, wastes public money, catalyses conflict and war, institutionalises corruption, glorifies violence, sustains oppressive and genocidal regimes, and excuses the conduct of torture.

Reed Elsevier is undoubtedly associated with these reprehensible aspects of the arms industry, and by association, so is *The Lancet*. Your request to Reed Elsevier to "divest itself of all business interests that threaten human, and especially civilian, health and wellbeing" has clearly been ignored.

We therefore write to express our support of your position on this issue and to say that we will be asking Reed Elsevier directly to get out of this sordid industry and instead align itself to the values and principles espoused by *The Lancet*.

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- 1 The Lancet and The Lancet Editorial Advisory Board. Reed Elsevier and the arms trade. *Lancet* 2005; **366**: 868.

Medsin is a student organisation aiming to tackle local and global health inequalities. As future health-care professionals, we are alarmed that

*The Lancet* is published by a company heavily involved in the international arms trade.

Reed Elsevier's subsidiaries are responsible for organising arms fairs in the UK (Defence Systems and Equipment International [DSEI]) and abroad (Latin American Aero and Defence).<sup>1</sup> Delegates from countries perpetrating human rights abuses were invited to DSEI 2005, where weapons used to carry out torture and cluster bombs were on sale, despite these being illegal for export from the UK.<sup>2</sup>

We believe that involvement in the arms trade is incompatible with the publishing of a journal committed to international public health. It contravenes several articles in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, notably the "right to life, liberty and security of person".<sup>3</sup> Reed Elsevier is a signatory of the UN Global Compact, supporting and respecting human rights.<sup>4</sup> It is therefore breaking its own ethical code by continuing to organise arms fairs. Furthermore, promoting the sale of arms to developing countries undermines health systems by encouraging spending on arms rather than health sector development, education, and sanitation.<sup>5</sup>

We call on Reed Elsevier to free itself of association with the arms trade. If it does not, we ask shareholders to reconsider their support for an industry incompatible with the realisation of health as a universal human right. Medsin are wholly supportive of *The Lancet's* ongoing work on conflict and its position on this issue. However, if the association of Reed Elsevier with this industry is not abandoned, we must ask *The Lancet* to find an alternative publisher.

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- 1 Campaign Against Arms Trade. Reed Elsevier: the Arms Fair specialists. <http://www.caat.org.uk/armsfairs/reed.php> (accessed Feb 25, 2007).

- 2 Thomas M. As used on the famous Nelson Mandela. London: Ebury Press, 2006.
- 3 United Nations. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. <http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html> (accessed Feb 25, 2007).
- 4 United Nations Global Compact. <http://www.unglobalcompact.org/> (accessed Feb 25, 2007).
- 5 Oxfam. In the public interest: health, education, and water and sanitation for all. Oxford: Oxfam International, 2006. [http://www.oxfam.org.uk/what\\_we\\_do/issues/debt\\_aid/downloads/public\\_interest.pdf](http://www.oxfam.org.uk/what_we_do/issues/debt_aid/downloads/public_interest.pdf) (accessed Feb 25, 2007).

Doctors for Iraq is a Baghdad-based non-governmental organisation (NGO) providing medical relief. We are one of the main campaigning NGOs focusing on the right to health inside Iraq. Doctors for Iraq was established in October, 2003, by Iraqi doctors who experienced first-hand the brutal impact the invasion of Iraq has had on the health system in the country. My colleagues and I have worked inside the different conflict zones of Iraq: Fallujah, Basra, Hadeetha, Al Qaim, Baghdad, and Najaf.

One of the most horrific experiences that I lived through and that still haunts my colleagues and I was the 2004 US-led attack on the city of Fallujah. I was trapped inside the city, working in the field clinics after US troops banned doctors from working in the main hospital. I remember vividly when a family of four women and three children were brought to the field clinic; their bodies were shattered, their limbs no longer attached to their bodies. The 8-year-old's brain was missing. The family house had been attacked by a special missile. I tried desperately to help the 4-year-old, who was the only survivor. Her whole body was covered in what looked like pin holes, and one of her legs had been cut in half.

I met another child while working in Basra. She had lost 17 members of her family, and her right leg, in a cluster bomb attack on her village.

During the invasion, the wounded stood with patience in long queues, their bullet wounds gaping. Often their vascular systems were so damaged that my colleagues and I were forced

to amputate, leaving them in agony. Most of those who I tried to treat were young; I still remember their faces.

Doctors for Iraq recently did some research with Oxfam for the Control Arms campaign, documenting the availability and price of unconventional bullets on the Baghdad black market. Our joint research showed that the average price of a bullet is between 10 and 40 US cents, and that taking a life in Iraq costs as little as \$2-40.

My colleagues and I read about how *The Lancet's* publishing company is engaged in promoting the arms trade by hosting arms fairs. How can it be that a medical publication defending the right to health and advocating for a better quality of life has a relationship with such a company? I am very disturbed and shocked by this news and, as someone who has witnessed the misery that these immoral weapons cause, I urge *The Lancet* to re-examine its relationship with its publishers. I fear that as a result of this current partnership, *The Lancet's* position as a champion of global health, and its strong moral and ethical stance, will be compromised.

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### The Editors of *The Lancet* reply

We are very concerned, once again, by the issue of arms fairs and the adverse effects this industry has on civilian public health. We are also concerned about the damage that is being done to *The Lancet's* reputation because of the association underlined by our correspondents here—namely, the organisation of arms exhibitions by Reed Elsevier, the current owners of *The Lancet*.

The journal that we edit was founded in 1823 at a time of progressive scientific enlightenment and social reform. We are physicians and scientists who try to translate these traditions into the work we do now—

selecting, commissioning, and writing medical science and journalism. Our overall objective is to use *The Lancet* as a means of protecting and advancing human health.

When the connection between Reed Elsevier and the arms trade was drawn to our attention in 2005, we joined our International Advisory Board to ask the company to divest itself of this part of its business.<sup>1</sup> We argued that the arms trade was incompatible with the professional values of a health-science publisher—promoting health and wellbeing, reducing death and disability, respecting human rights, and showing concern for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in society. Reed Elsevier supported our freedom to say what we did, but has so far declined to pursue our request.

Since 2005, we have been alerted to two additional arms exhibitions organised by Reed Elsevier. The 2007 SHOT Show, held in Orlando in January, claims to be “the world’s premier exposition” for firearms. It attracted buyers from 75 countries. The products highlighted on the SHOT Show website foster a disturbing culture of violence. The Armalite A24 handgun, for example, is promoted as “beautiful”, a handgun for “any serious shooter”. The small arms business is responsible for 200 000 gun homicides annually, most in low-income and middle-income countries that are least able or willing to control the trade in weapons. Gun violence contributes to poverty, food insecurity, health-system disruption, and civilian deaths. Organising arms exhibitions helps to increase access to weapons and so encourage violence. This is in direct breach of recommendations from WHO in its landmark *World Report on Violence and Health*.<sup>2</sup>

The 2007 International Defence Exhibition and Conference (IDEX) was held in Abu Dhabi in February. This meeting was clearly an arms fair. The website of IDEX reports that, “IDEX provides the ideal venue for the defence industry to showcase



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new technologies and equipment to prospective buyers from the growing defence market in the Middle East, Asia, and Far East". According to one news source,<sup>3</sup> which *The Lancet* has independently confirmed, these technologies included 500 kg cluster bombs, one of the most deadly weapons encountered by civilians, especially children.

Editors<sup>4</sup> and contributors<sup>5</sup> to other Elsevier journals have also signalled their alarm at this misalliance of interests. And the opposition to Reed Elsevier's policy has spread to prominent and respected non-Reed-Elsevier medical journals.<sup>6,7</sup> A petition with nearly 1000 names has been launched to object to Reed Elsevier's support for the arms trade.<sup>8</sup> A call to boycott Reed Elsevier journals<sup>9</sup> includes many scientists (eg, Sir Michael Atiyah, a former President of the UK's Royal Society) whose views should be of profound concern to any publisher. Editors at the *BMJ* have called on medical researchers to stop sending randomised clinical trials to *The Lancet* and other Reed Elsevier titles.<sup>7</sup> One investor has recently sold its £2 million stake in the company because of Reed Elsevier's links to arms.<sup>10</sup>

The editors of *The Lancet* face a difficult situation. We value greatly our close relationships with the Royal Colleges and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. We very much respect the work of the human rights organisations that have written to us. The collective support of these groups and individuals is vital to the journal. If they withdrew that support, our future would be materially harmed and the credibility of our work on issues such as child survival would be severely compromised. We cannot imagine that Reed Elsevier seeks such an outcome for *The Lancet* or any of the thousands of journals it publishes. Yet the company's present stance is leading us in that direction.

Faced with the impasse we find ourselves in, what should we do?

Our International Advisory Board advises us that "the current situation is bizarre and untenable"; "a company involved in health journals cannot be associated with the organisation of arms exhibitions as the current owners of *The Lancet* are"; "it is hard to believe that the company will continue for long with this dreadful association"; "the genuine danger [is] that if they [Reed Elsevier] continue in the present way the sale and quality of their scientific journals may be seriously threatened"; "the journal needs to take a firm stand on this issue"; "my main concern is for the independence of *The Lancet*"; we must try "to break these strong financial ties in the interest of health"; and "an organised campaign" should be seriously considered.

After a great deal of reflection, including consultation within Elsevier and Reed Elsevier, we wish to emphasise the following points:

(1) *The Lancet* reaffirms its view that arms exhibitions have no legitimate place within the portfolio of a company whose core business concerns are health and science. This part of Reed Elsevier's operation should be divested as soon as possible.

(2) *The Lancet* is given complete editorial freedom by Reed Elsevier, a rare asset. Reed Elsevier—and specifically its science and medical publishing division, Elsevier—not only supports but also encourages our independence. This is a tremendous strength and should give scientists and physicians confidence in the publishing integrity of *The Lancet* and Elsevier.

(3) Although we do not speak officially for the company, we know that, as one of four divisions of Reed Elsevier, Elsevier operates with the highest standards of scientific, medical, and publishing ethics.

(4) Reed Elsevier can change. For example, at Reed Elsevier's Defence Systems and Equipment International (DSEi) exhibition in 2005, there was no explicit ban on cluster bombs. For DSEi 2007, cluster bombs are explicitly

prohibited. Dialogue can move hearts and minds. Debate, as opposed to a boycott of *The Lancet* and other Elsevier journals, should continue.

(5) Reed Elsevier is not a monolithic structure. We meet people across the organisation with a diversity of views and perspectives. On the question of arms exhibitions, we have found that a growing number of our Elsevier colleagues, who have long standing relationships with scientific societies and authors, are questioning Reed Elsevier's decision to continue in this business. At a time of fierce debate over author-pays open access journals and open archiving, Reed Elsevier, many of them say, needs to be making strong alliances, not creating new enemies.

There is an emerging view both outside and inside Elsevier that operating a key link in the arms trade is contrary to the values inherent in health and health science publishing. Recent events show that this view is strengthening. What effect this common attitude will have on Reed Elsevier is hard to tell. We are certain that further change is possible.

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- 1 The Lancet and The Lancet Editorial Advisory Board. Reed Elsevier and the arms trade. *Lancet* 2005; **366**: 868.
- 2 WHO. World Report on Violence and Health. Geneva: World Health Organization, 2002.
- 3 Kenyon P. Abu Dhabi arms fair markets death, destruction. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7492243> (accessed March 8, 2007).
- 4 Chatterton P, Featherstone D. Intervention: Elsevier, critical geography, and the arms trade. *Political Geography* 2007; **26**: 3–7.
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- 6 Smith R. Reed-Elsevier's hypocrisy in selling arms and health. *JR Soc Med* 2007; **100**: 1–2.
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- 8 Elsevier petition. <http://www.idiolect.org.uk/elsevier/petition.php> (accessed March 8, 2007).
- 9 No to Reed-Elsevier! <http://cage.ugent.be/~npg/elsevier/signatories.html> (accessed March 8, 2007).
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