

Statement Signed by Respected US Physicians and Researchers on Health Workers on Trial in Libya

On December 19, it is expected that a Libyan court will render a verdict in the case of five nurses--Valya Cherveniyashka, Snezhanka Dimitrova, Nasya Nenova, Valentina Siropulo, and Kristiana Valcheva--and a physician--Ashraf Ahmad Jum'a--unjustly accused of 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. The prisoners face a death sentence or continued years in prison.

Repeated scientific studies, including a new study published this month 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.

Signed by:

Paul Farmer, MD, PhD

Maud and Lillian Presley Professor of Medical Anthropology Co-Director, Program in Infectious Disease and Social Change Department of Social Medicine, Harvard Medical School Vice Chair, Division of Social Medicine and Health Inequalities Brigham and Women's Hospital; Medical Director, Zamni Lasante, Cange, Haiti; Founding Director, Partners In Health Boston, MA

Max Essex, MD, MGF

Lasker Professor & Chair, Harvard AIDS Institute and Department of Immunology and Infectious Diseases Harvard School of Public Health Boston, MA

Howard Hiatt, M.D.

Professor of Medicine, Harvard Medical School
Former Dean, Harvard School of Public Health
Boston, MA

Daniel Kuritzkes, MD

Professor of Medicine, Harvard Medical School
President, HIV Medicine Association
Boston, MA

Paul Volberding, MD

Professor and Vice Chair, UCSF Department of Medicine Co-Director, UCSF-GIVI Center for AIDS
Research San Francisco, CA