

Editor ousted: Gaza conflict costs journalist her job

Medical Journal editor resigns after her bosses claim 'reputational damage'

04 APRIL 2024 - 12:40
by CHRIS BATEMAN



Bridget Farham. Picture: Supplied

The war in Gaza has cost the editor of the South African Medical Journal her job. Bridget Farham declined to publish two articles critical of Israel's attack on Gaza because neither had made reference to the October 7 attack by

Hamas on Israeli civilians. She outlined her reasons for the rejection in an editorial.

Farham resigned after the South African Medical Association (Sama) criticised her editorial last month in which she said there was “no moral equivalence” between the Hamas raid and Israel’s continuing destruction of Gaza.

Farham had withdrawn her editorial after e-mails from pro-Palestinian Sama members. This week she agreed to “a mutual parting of ways” after the Sama executive cited “reputational damage”, having issued an arbitrary head office public apology without consulting her.

Her departure prompted a strongly worded letter to Sama chair Mvuyisi Mzukwa from the editors emeritus of the journal and former UCT deans of medicine professors Dan Ncayiyana and JP van Niekerk.

They said the correct approach would have been to encourage and publish appropriate rebuttals when material that raised the ire of individuals or groups was published. They told Mzukwa that when equivalent bodies of Sama in other countries acted against their editors “on quasi political grounds”, it had a detrimental effect on the journal’s owners. The academics/clinicians reaffirmed their allegiance to editorial responsibilities as outlined in the press code of conduct by the Press Council of South Africa.

The executive director of the South African National Editors Forum, Reggy Moalusi, described it as “an unfortunate development that the Sama board had to interfere with Dr Farham’s editorial. We’re always of the view that editors should be allowed to take independent editorial decisions and be allowed to do their work. It’s clear from the editorial that she was taking no sides.”

In the editorial, headlined “Israel, Gaza and moral equivalence”, Farham outlines her experience of the Middle East conflagration and says she declined two editorial submissions that were “heavily biased towards Palestine”. She was accused by the writers of “moral cowardice”.

Farham wrote: “I watched the events of October 7 2023 with complete horror. An Israeli friend, whose family were displaced from the southern Gaza border on that day, let us all know that he was safe. My many Jewish friends and colleagues were in a state of complete shock. I must be honest and say that I did not ask my Muslim friends how they were feeling, which may have been an oversight. However, reading the news, acts of anti-Semitism around the globe massively increased immediately after the event,

even before Israel launched their 'self-defence' barrage of missiles into Gaza. That alone tells me that anti-Semitism lies very close to the surface, and the feeling that there is no longer a safe homeland is completely understandable.

"But now, 160 days into the war, I am once again watching in complete horror as Israel goes, to my mind, far beyond the right to self-defence. The utter devastation that has been wreaked on Gaza is of biblical proportions and indeed Benjamin Netanyahu has used biblical references when sending his army into Gaza. The death toll so far exceeds any other recent conflict, and the disproportionate killing of women and children is horrific and cannot be seen as 'collateral damage'. And now that we have entered the holy month of Ramadan, the images of families at Iftar meals in the rubble are heart breaking.

"The almost complete destruction of medical facilities, the use of rape as a weapon of war (evidence suggests by both sides in the conflict) and the sheer scale of the destruction and displacement are to be condemned. I have mixed feelings about South Africa's petition to the ICJ [International Court of Justice] accusing Israel of genocide, mainly because they have been remarkably silent about similar events in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and not because I feel the case was completely without merit.

"The same person who accused me of moral cowardice for not publishing her submission on the weaponisation of health system destruction also said that she, and many others, feel that the events of October 7 2023 can be justified by 75 years of Israeli oppression. This is where I cannot agree. Nothing justifies the horror that was meted out to families on the southern Gaza border that day. Just as nothing justifies Israel's continuing destruction of Gaza and its people. There is no moral equivalence."

Prof Ncayiyana, a former member of the World Medical Editors Forum, has been quoted as saying interference with medical editors by their politically correct medical principals is nothing new.