

Submission to the Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights Study on Antisemitism in Canada

I am writing on behalf of the Jewish Medical Association of British Columbia. We are a group of physicians and health care professionals, which was formed in Oct. of 2023 in response to the rise of antisemitism that has pervaded our medical schools and institutions. Hundreds of Jewish doctors and health professionals complained of being silenced and harassed by others and were looking for a group to represent their concerns. In addition, many learners were being targeted solely because they were Jewish and needed a group to support them.

IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM OF ANTISEMITISM

To obtain some objective analysis, we performed a survey of our members in Sept. 2024 which revealed that:

52% of respondents have avoided publicly wearing, carrying, or displaying things that might help people identify them as a Jew out of fear of antisemitism.

45% have experienced antisemitism in the health care system in the past year.

30% have felt concern for patients because of antisemitic bias of colleagues.

17% have considered leaving the profession or changing their workplace

41% said they found it challenging to have effective relationships with colleagues because of antisemitic attitudes.

Stories are legion about Jewish colleagues who have been affected. There is a generalized fear among Jewish health professionals that if they don't hide their Jewish identity, they will be subject to intimidation and exclusion by others. It's not clear how many physicians will leave their jobs because of antisemitism, but this is a frequent topic of conversation among Jewish health professionals.

We worry to an even greater extent about our Jewish, and some non-Jewish patients, who fear being referred to antisemitic physicians. Some are asking only to be referred to Jewish physicians because they fear that they will otherwise be treated as second class patients. It's painful to think that this is even an issue in Canada in 2025, but after hearing from many patients about this, we know that this is their worry.

This perception is also present with students trying to enter medical and allied fields of health. There is a wide consensus among students that if they want to be accepted to medical school, that they must downplay their Jewishness. They are being told not to wear jewelry that may identify them as being Jewish and not to discuss volunteer work they have done within the Jewish community.

SPECIFIC ANTISEMITISM ON CAMPUS

The politicization of medical students is of great concern. In Oct. 2023, a significant number of UBC medical students signed a petition saying: “we empathize with the Palestinian people who have been continually abused, traumatized, and killed by the settler state of Israel and its Western allies for over 75 years,” and “We believe that it is important for UBC to make their voice heard on this matter to send a strong message of support for Palestinian civilians who are being killed in collective punishment through the indiscriminate bombing of Gaza.” While one can appreciate their support for the people of Gaza, putting the blame solely on the ‘settler state of Israel,’ inappropriately oversimplifies a complex Middle Eastern war.

This bias has not abated: A similar petition in 2025 stated: “The targeting of civilians, destruction of healthcare, obstruction of aid, and weaponization of starvation are not isolated tragedies — they are systematic violations of international law rooted in decades of apartheid and occupation. As health workers, we recognize this as the annihilation of the very foundations of health and survival.”

In addition, in the classroom, many faculty members are promoting an anti-Israel agenda, questioning Israel’s right to exist. As an example, students in the School of Midwifery were asked to do a ‘Genocide Acknowledgement’ before attending class. On social media, many professors engage in one-sided comments on the political situation in the Middle East. Students see these social media posts, and must sit in classrooms knowing that their teachers have extreme political views. This can irrevocably poison the learning atmosphere for these students.

Another recent example of antisemitism has been in school graduation ceremonies. The UBC medical school graduation included a speech describing the ‘genocide’ in Gaza, with people in the audience shouting, “Free, free Palestine.” In anticipation of this, we had met with assistant deans prior to graduation to try to convince them to keep graduation ceremonies non-political, but this was to no avail.

At a 2025 UBC law school graduation, a former BC Human Rights Commissioner gave a similar description of the ‘genocide’ in Gaza.

This is not only happening in British Columbia, as the valedictorian of the 2024 medical school graduation at the University of Manitoba made several references to the ‘genocide’ occurring in Gaza. As a chorus of cheers rose from the audience, one can imagine how a graduating Jewish student might have felt in this milieu.

Jews have a special connection with Israel, and when there is an obsessive focus on Israel as a perpetrator of crimes, it can only make most Jews uncomfortable and feel excluded. The causes of and manifestations of a Middle East war are quite complex and there are usually two sides to the story. To focus excessively on the concerns of one side and not to consider the perspective of the

other side is the opposite of a good education. However, this is happening in Canadian medical schools and on campuses of Canadian universities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Universities must recognize that hatred towards specific groups is not acceptable. What affects Jews will ultimately affect people of other religions and ethnicities. The university must be a place which fosters healthy debates and inclusivity.

University administrators must acknowledge that discrimination against Jews is a major issue. They must call out antisemitism for what it is, a major hatred commonly seen in schools of higher learning. We have implored deans of medicine and presidents of universities to acknowledge the presence of antisemitism, but they fall back to the position that hatred against any group is bad, and thus the problem isn't confronted. They need to recognize the scourge of antisemitism specifically and deal with it directly.

Jewish people invariably top the list of the group with the highest incidents of hate crimes targeted against them, even though Jews comprise about 1 % of the Canadian population.

Many people do not understand the history of the Jewish people, the history of antisemitism and modern manifestations of antisemitism, one of which is excessive criticism of the modern Jewish state, Israel. There is an urgent need for people in administrative positions and for students to have a clearer picture of Jewish history and to understand the significance of the longstanding presence of antisemitism in society.

CONCLUSION

Antisemitism is widespread in our society. It is being tolerated by our governments, our institutions and our teachers, and not being adequately dealt with.

Jewish students and health care practitioners must be made to feel that are being treated fairly.

Patients who are Jewish need to be treated properly, and to know that all patients are being treated equally without regard to their religion or ethnicity.

Medical schools need to recognize and to deal with antisemitism in an effective way.

Antisemitism and other discriminatory practices must not determine which students get accepted to professional schools.

Universities must be places where real learning takes place and all people (outside of people who espouse violence) must be permitted to state their opinions openly. The concept of 'Institutional Neutrality' should prevail.

Submitted by Dr. Larry Barzelai, on behalf of the Jewish Medical Association of B.C.