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Forging Medical Certificates and Posing as Doctors, are the Main Reasons behind Medical Errors

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Summary

Several people in the opposition-held rural Hama were victims of medical errors committed by fake doctors as well as specialists, between January 2018 and February 7, 2019, the date of preparing this report.¹

Medical errors, which gravely harmed dozens in rural Hama, were attributed to the lack of the medical oversight and the production of forged medical certificates amidst the absence of laws and censorship, as witnesses stated to STJ, including the Minister of Health of the Syrian Interim Government.

The falsification of certificates in medicine and pharmacy was prevalent in rural Hama. Opening a pharmacy became the same as opening a supermarket or a restaurant. It's all about money. There are more than 60 pharmacies in eastern and western Hama; only 24 of them are authorized by the Syrian Government's Ministry of Health of, while the rest are unlicensed and owned by unqualified people. But what's worse is when those fake pharmacists prescribe and give medicines to patients by their own, which leads to serious side effects on them. That prompted the Ministry of Health of the Syrian Interim Government to impose significant censorship on doctors and pharmacists when starting the practice of their professions and on their recruitment process.

As of November 2018, STJ reported the death of three people and the harm of two, including a child, in northeastern Syria's Autonomous enclave, due to medical errors made by physicians or people posing as them.²

1. He lost the ability to walk due to a medical error

Medical errors are such a blight on those affected, as in the case of the witness Abdulhameed ash-Shuhna³, who was admitted to a hospital in Kafr Zita following a motor accident in April 2018, which resulted in minor fractures to the leg and smashes in the hip bones. Ash-Shuhna underwent a surgery during which the doctor in charge, who was described by the witness as inexperienced, committed a serious mistake made Abdulhameed confined to bed till today.

Ash-Shuhna testified to STJ, saying:

¹ Rural Hama has been controlled by rebel groups including Jihadist; most notably Jaysh al-Izza and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), as of February 7, 2019.

² "Wrongful Deaths Caused by Medical Errors in Northeastern Syria's Autonomous Enclaves", December 19, 2018, <https://www.stj-sy.com/en/view/1100>

³ The witness Abdulhameed ash-Shuhna, born in 1982 in Hama. He is married with children and used to work as a teacher in Kafr Nabl town, southern Idlib, then moved to live in Kafr Zita city in north Hama.

"In April 2018, while I was riding my motorbike down Khan Sheikhoun road heading to the school I used to teach Arabic at in Kafr Nabl, I swerved off the road and crashed right into a boulder. Fortunately, a driver of a car passed by took me to a hospital in Kahn Sheikhoun. The doctors gave me painkillers, then fastened my leg with a fixation device temporarily to take x-rays. I had to choose between staying at that hospital to the next day till the orthopedist come or to go to another hospital. Actually, I chose to go to al-Maghara hospital in Kafr Zita, there I could call my family to inform them about the accident. The doctor in charge there recommended an emergency operation to install metal plates for the two fractures in my hip. The operation lasted for an hour and a half, and I stayed at the hospital for three days during which they injected me serums for three days before I was discharged. My condition was stable. I thought it was just a simple operation and that the metal plates would be removed as soon as my hip gets better".

2. My leg was about to be amputated

Several days later, Abdulhameed suffered infections and swelling in his injured leg, so he went back to al-Maghara hospital, where the nurses squeezed the swollen area and remove the pus out.

Ash-Shuhna added:

"I kept getting worse, so I headed to a hospital in Saraqib city, southern Idlib, where the doctor told me that germs got in the wound during the operation and caused inflammation. The doctor in who did me the surgery is the one responsible, since the accident caused me only minor fractures but not injuries. This doctor's acquaintances and colleagues assured me that he made numerous medical errors before, which caused deformations and disabilities to many, including his own brother who left with one leg shorter than the other. Anyway, I underwent weekly sessions to disinfect the area and I took antibiotics for a month to avoid the transmission of bacteria to the bones. The doctor in Saraqib said that my leg might be amputated if the infections had not been healed. However, I did another surgery in which the metal plates were removed, and an external apparatus was fixed to my leg. My knee was also fixed with a device since I had had a fracture there. Now I suffer calcification in my knee, I cannot bend it, I even can't get out of bed. I hope I could walk as before. All those unqualified doctors should be dismissed and be held accountable."

Ash-Shuhna never tried to lodge a complaint to the relevant authorities, arguing that it would be in vain as its predecessors, submitted by other medical error victims in Hama.



The witness Abdulhameed ash-Shuhna. Photo credit: Abdulhameed ash-Shuhna.

3. He could no longer provide for his family

Firas Sweid⁴, is also a victim of a medical error occurred during the operation he underwent after being hit by shrapnel in the leg in 2017 in al-Lataminah town, to where he had displaced in 2013 from his hometown Qamhana town. He testified to STJ saying:

“I was injured by a missile hit my house during the shelling on the al-Masasina village by the Syrian Army tanks, in 2017. Several tiny shrapnel penetrated my body, one of them broke my leg from below the knee. The doctor recommended an urgent operation to install a fixation device. The operation lasted for about one hour. The doctor said it went well and allowed me to leave hospital, I asked him to x-ray my leg before, just to know if it was okay, but he said there was no need. The day after, at home, I got a fever, and my situation deteriorated much in three days. My friend took me to some doctor in the village, who told me in shock that there was a serious physician error committed, as the doctor who performed the surgery closed the wounds without installing a tube drainage, which resulted in bad infections.”

⁴ The witness Firas Sweid was born in 1980 and he is married with children.

4. One of my legs became 3cm shorter than the other

Firas and his friend headed to the Kafr Nabl hospital, where he got an x-ray showed that the surgery didn't work, as the doctor joined the endings of the bones to each other wrongly. This caused one of Firas's leg to become 3cm shorter than the other, besides he suffered acute inflammation because of the pus in the wound as the doctor who had done the operation did not install an internal drainage.

Firas recalled:

"At the Kafr Nabl hospital, I underwent an urgent operation to remove the fixation device along with the rotten flesh resulted from the infection, and I stayed for a whole month there. Actually, I got a little bit better then. After that the doctor installed me a new external fixation device, it remained for five months. After a week from removing it, later, my leg swelled, and the pain and infection returned. The doctor prescribed me antibiotics, which I brought from Turkey. Now my leg doesn't ach, but it is deformed, as it became 3cm shorter than the other. I feel tired if I walk or stand for just minutes. In addition, my living condition is very difficult since it's very hard to find a job doesn't not require much efforts, which suits my physical abilities. I did not file a complaint against the doctor who did me the first operation because I think it will take a long time and be fruitless."



The witness Firas Sweid prior the incident. Photo credit: Firas Sweid

5. medical mistakes affect dozens in rural Hama alone

What is worse, is the prevalence of fake doctors in the opposition-held rural Hama, which is a major challenge for the health sector there, as reported by Mohammed Firas, the Minister of Health of the Syrian Interim Government, who talked to STJ saying:

"We admit the occurrence of plenty medical errors, committed by both doctors and people posing as them, in rural Hama, yet there are no exact statistics on their numbers. However, we can tell that those got harmed by medication errors in 2018 estimated at dozens, several of them eventually died. The Syrian Interim Government's Ministry of Health has 12 hospitals and health centers distributed over eastern and western Hama, they are; al-Sham, al-Maghara, al-Latamenh, Tarmella, and 111, while the health centers are: Qastoun, Sahl al-Ghab al-Janoubi, Qalaat al-Madiq, Kafr Nabudah, Nabd al-Hayat, al-Salam, and al-Baroudi. We hired doctors and nurses after we highly inspect their university certificates submitted. Our hiring office received several forged diplomas; it's disdain for human life. It is worth mentioning that most of the health sector's employees are recruited by the supporting organizations."

Firas affirmed that all fake doctors, nurses and pharmacists who got caught, be persecuted by the Ministry of Health of the Syrian Interim Government.

"Out of our belief that the medical sector must stay free from this phenomenon of counterfeiting, we sent special missions to examine and verify the university certificates of the health sector's staff, especially in the areas under the Syrian Interim Government, to make sure all the certificates submitted by doctors, nurses, and laboratory officers in our hospitals and health centers are authentic. We spotted certificates belong to undergraduate doctors and nurses who couldn't complete their university studies due to the ongoing conflict in Syria, their certificates are also considered to be fake, thus they were dismissed.

Moreover, we asked the supporting organizations to examine the certificates submitted with job applications thoroughly, before being sent the to the Ministry of Health which in turn verify their authenticity. Unfortunately, in spite of taking firm actions, the falsification phenomenon hasn't end yet."

6. over six fake physicians were caught in Hama

Mnawar al-Ma'youf, Chief of Pharmacists Syndicate of Hama and Manager of the Administration of Quality and Control in the Ministry of Health of the Syrian Interim Government, spoke to STJ about the Administration's mechanism of detecting the falsification of certificates and the measures taken to prevent and reduce this phenomenon spawned by lawlessness in the areas got out of the Syrian Government's hand in Hama

He said:

"Before the creation of the Administration of Quality and Control in June 2018, we detected several fake university certificates for people already hired as doctors in hospitals, and the only measure taken at the time was to terminate their employment contracts. However, the Administration deals with it more strictly; beside terminating contracts it circulates the fake doctors' names on all hospitals and medical centers to ensure they will not resume work. The Administration spotted more than 6 fake medical diplomas so far, mainly in general surgeon specialty, for alleged doctors worked in several hospitals in Hama. It proved the certificates' falseness by comparing them with original ones, focusing on details like the material of paper used, stamps' shape, signatures...etc. besides conducting background checks on their holders by questioning their acquaintances and students of the same university class. Regarding pharmacy, the Administration counted 63 pharmacies in Hama, only 24 of them licensed by the Syrian Government's Ministry of Health, while the rest were unregistered and run by unqualified people".

Al-Ma'youf added that medical errors leave devastating impact on victims and lead them to be drug or painkiller abusers. This kind of addiction spread among the war-wounded especially those with amputated limbs.

"The Ministry of Health have committed itself to addressing this issue, as it took responsibility to thoroughly examine the certificates submitted before validating them, and to monitor all working pharmacies including the unregistered, as it doesn't have authorization to close them, since they are under the private sector and do not follow our administration officially. Only the security services could shut them down and held their owners accountable."

7. The relevant authorities are to blame for the persistence of this phenomenon

The lawyer Abdunnaser Hoshan illustrated to STJ the penalties prescribed by the Syrian law for the forgery of certificates, especially the medical. He said:

"According to the Syrian Penal Code forging university certificates, or any other official documents, interpreted as constituting a criminal offence carrying a five-year prison sentence with hard labor. If the false medicine certificate holder commits a medical error, his/her sentence will depend on the extent of harm he/she caused to the victim. In case the patient dies as a result of a medical error, the Syrian Penal Code considers it as a murder, which perpetrator gets a life sentence with hard labor. Actually, also those who hold verified certificates are to be prosecuted by the Syrian law in case they work without permit, particularly in the medicine area, based on the Legislative Decree No. 12 of 1970, which provides that doctors, pharmacists and laboratory officers who work without a permit are under penalty of sanction.

Chaos and insecurity led to the spread of medical errors in the areas got out of the Syrian government's hand, which resulted in serious consequences, and the relevant authorities are the ones to blame for that. They should make every effort to reduce the spread of this phenomenon and to hold the criminals accountable. There must be an inspection role and rigid laws to eliminate every kind of falsification."

سوريون
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الحقيقة
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Syrians
For Truth
& Justice



About Syrians for Truth and Justice:

STJ is an independent, nongovernmental organization whose members include Syrian human rights defenders, advocates and academics of different backgrounds and nationalities.

The initiative strives for SYRIA, where all Syrian citizens (females and males) have dignity, equality, justice and equal human rights.

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