

Dear World Medical Association Council Chair, Dr Edward Hill and the Council

We the undersigned 725 physicians represent both academic medicine (114 professors) and clinical practice in 43 countries. A matter of grave concern to us, and a threat to the public reputation of the World Medical Association, has brought us together in this perhaps unprecedented medical initiative. We wish to publicly protest and appeal against the recent appointment of Dr Yoram Blachar, longstanding President of the Israeli Medical Association, as President of the World Medical Association. We believe that his Presidency makes a mockery of the principles on which the WMA was founded in 1947, which was as a response to egregious abuses by German and Japanese doctors in World War Two.

The WMA's own Declaration of Tokyo (1975) specifies that "physicians shall not countenance, condone or participate in the practice of torture or other forms of cruel, inhuman or degrading procedures, and in all situations, including armed conflict and civil conflict". The WMA Annual General Assembly of 2007 made it clear that inaction was not an option, stating that "this is the first time the WMA has explicitly obliged doctors to document cases of torture of which they become aware. The absence of documenting and denouncing such acts might be considered as a form of tolerance and of non-assistance to the victims".(1) There are still more recent calls from authoritative academic sources for the international medical community to go much further in actively allying itself with efforts to suppress mistreatment of prisoners. (2)

Amnesty International concluded as long ago as 1996 that Israeli doctors working with the security services "formed part of a system in which detainees are tortured, ill treated and humiliated in ways that place prison medical practice in conflict with medical ethics". (3) Dr Blachar, already IMA President, took no action. Amnesty's briefing to the UN Committee against Torture in September 2008 "focuses on Amnesty International's (continuing) concerns about Israel's failure to implement the Convention against Torture in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and the intensification of measures amounting to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment and punishment".(4)

A well publicised report in 2007 by the Public Committee Against Torture in Israel (PCATI), based on the detailed testimony of 9 Palestinian men tortured between 2004 and 2006, gives a graphic demonstration of the extent to which Israeli doctors continue to form an integral and everyday part of the running of interrogation suites whose output is torture. (5) The IMA have conceded that they were aware of this report, but did nothing. More recently, at a meeting on December 10 2008 in Tel Aviv, with Dr Blachar presiding only weeks after his inauguration as WMA President, Physicians for Human Rights Israel again sought (unsuccessfully) to get the IMA to face this report and all the other evidence in the public domain.

In its 2008 annual report to the UN Committee Against Torture, the UAT Coalition, a coalition of 14 Israeli and Palestinian human rights organisations, concluded that "since the Committee last reviewed Israel, the practice of torture and ill treatment has continued unabated. The UAT Coalition wishes to inform the Committee that in its opinion the use of torture and ill treatment by Israeli authorities against Palestinians is both widespread and systematic. The UAT Coalition has recorded evidence of acts, omissions and complicity by agents of the State at all levels....until this culture of impunity is addressed this situation is unlikely to improve".(6)

In November 2008, PCATI filed a contempt of court motion to the High Court of Justice against the government of Israel and the General Security Service for their responsibility for a policy that grants a-priori permits to use torture in interrogations. The IMA have never challenged torture as state policy in Israel.

Dr Blachar went as far as to justify the use in Israel of "moderate physical pressure" (condemned as torture by the UN Committee Against Torture) in the fourth paragraph of a letter published in the international medical journal *The Lancet* in 1997 (7, and attached pdf). This surely unprecedented action by the president of a national medical association has not been disowned, and renders him unfit for the office of WMA President. In the age of evidence-based medicine his rejection of the documentary record has been unprofessional and frequently contemptuous. On the British Medical Journal (BMJ) website he dismissed a BMJ paper on health and human rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territories- which cited Amnesty, Johns Hopkins University, the International Court of Justice, a UN Rapporteur and

Physicians for Human Rights Israel- as "the lies and filth he spews and "reminiscent of some of the worst forms of anti-semitism ever espoused" (8) Indeed Dr Blachar has made statements which were untrue, and which he must have known were untrue, on at least 10 occasions in the Lancet and the BMJ in the past decade.(9) Given that these 2 international medical journals are amongst the world's most prestigious and influential, this is an intended corruption of the public record.

IMA membership of WMA appears to have been a figleaf: The IMA website pays lip service to medical ethics but Dr Blachar has overseen a studied failure to take the actions mandated by the Declaration of Tokyo.

We conclude that under Dr Blachar's leadership the IMA made a decision on political grounds years ago to turn a blind eye to torture in Israel and the institutionalised involvement of doctors. This stance continues with Dr Blachar as WMA President. On an issue that goes to the heart of the moral authority of the profession, Dr Blachar has offered shameful ethical leadership to doctors in Israel and worldwide.

It could scarcely be more scandalous that he now assumes the Presidency of the official international body overseeing medical ethics. This appointment will seriously damage the public reputation of the WMA and its work, and risks making it a laughing stock. We call upon the WMA Council to oblige Dr Blachar to step down as a matter of priority. Since the WMA is mandated to ensure that its member associations conform to its codes, we also request an investigation into the IMA record highlighted above.

In view of the public importance of this issue we are copying our letter and supporting documentation to international medical journals and mainstream newspapers for coverage.

We hope to hear from you and the WMA Council as soon as possible please.

Yours sincerely

Professor Alan Meyers (afmeyers@bu.edu) and 724 other physicians from: United Kingdom, Canada, USA, Lebanon, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Italy, South Africa, Norway, Occupied Palestinian Territories, Malaysia, Switzerland, Algeria, Iraq, Eire, Spain, Australia, India, New Zealand, Germany, France, Sweden, Pakistan, Tunisia, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Greece, Libya, Turkey, Bahrain, Belgium, Peru, Syria, Qatar, Nigeria, Czech Republic, France, Zambia, Denmark, Dubai, Kuwait, Argentina.

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Professor Alan Meyers
Associate Professor of Paediatrics
Boston University School of Medicine
Boston USA

Sir Iain Chalmers
James Lind Library
Oxford, UK

Baroness Dr Jenny Tonge
House of Lords
London, UK

Professor Ahmed Okasha
Past President, World Psychiatric Association
Ain Shams University, Cairo, Egypt

Dr Belgacem Sabri
World Health Organisation
Cairo, Egypt

Professor Hani Abdeen
Al Quds Medical School
Jerusalem, Palestine

Professor Wendy Savage
Middlesex University
London, UK

Professor Alice Rothchild
Obstetrics & Gynaecology
Boston, USA

Professor Leslie London
School of Public Health & Family Medicine
University of Cape Town
South Africa

Dr Brian Martindale
Member of World Psychiatric Assoc.
Educational Committee
Sunderland, UK

Professor Zaleha Mahdy
Member, Malaysian Medical Council
National University of Malaysia
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Dr Ruchama Marton
Founder President
Physicians for Human Rights
Tel Aviv, Israel

Professor James Martin
Medicine; Respiratory diseases
Westmount, Canada

Professor Pat Bracken
Clinical Director
West Cork Mental Health Services, Eire

Professor Michael Benny
Associate Professor of Medicine
Virginia, USA

Professor Colin Green
Surgical Research, Northwick Park Hospital
London, UK

Assoc Professor Jon Jureidini
Disciplines of Psychiatry & Paediatrics
University of Adelaide, Australia

Professor David Pegg
University of York, UK

Professor Mary Ganguli
Professor of Psychiatry,
Neurology & Epidemiology
Pittsburgh, USA

Professor Ala Sharara
Head of Gastroenterology
American University Beirut
Lebanon

Professor Cassim Motala
Paediatrician
University of Cape Town
Cape Town, South Africa

Professor Pierre L Auger
Clinical Professor, Occupational Medicine
Laval University
Quebec, Canada

Professor Juan Gervaas
Professor of International
& Public Health, Spain

Dr Pauline Cutting OBE
Accident & Emergency Consultant
Bangor, UK

Dr Ben Alofs
General Practitioner
Bangor, UK

Dr David Halpin
Consultant Orthopaedic & Trauma Surgeon
Newton Abbott, UK

Dr Chris Burns-Cox
Consultant Physician
Wotton under Edge, UK

Professor Tarek Okasha
Professor of Psychiatry
Ain Shams University
Cairo, Egypt

Professor Abdul-Latif Elmor
Public Health
Zagzig University, Egypt

Professor Marwan Haiz
Edmond J. Safra
Chair of Functional Neurosurgery
London, UK

Professor Wa-il Abouhendy
Head of Emergency/Disaster
Psychiatry unit, Zagazig University,
Arab Federation of Psychiatrists, Egypt

Professor Svein Haugsgjerd
Psychiatry
Oslo, Norway

Professor Mohamed Tikly
Professor of Rheumatology
University of Witwatersrand
Johannesburg, South Africa

Dr Hafizur Rehman
Senior Paediatrician
President of Islamic Medicine
Association of North America
New York, USA

Professor Mohamed Jeebhay
Specialist Occupational Medicine
Cape Town, South Africa

Professor Abdul Hakim Babar
Professor of Plastic Surgery
Lahore, Pakistan

Professor Masbah Omar
Orthopaedic Surgery
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Professor Abder Ahmane
Cardiac Surgery
Canada

Professor Husain Saleh
Chief, Department of Pathology
Wayne State University
Detroit, Michigan, USA

Professor Shabbir Wadee
Division of Forensic Science
Stellenbosch, University
South Africa

Professor Nida Hawash
Paediatrics
Willowvale, Canada

Professor A. Shamisa
Neurosurgery
Windsor, Canada

Professor Ismail Zayid
Dalhansie University
Nova Scotia, Canada

Professor Basim Al-Shihabi
Consultant Neuro-otologist
Stevenage, UK

Professor Mohammad Abbas
Orthopaedic Surgery Consultant
King Abdul Aziz University
Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

Professor Hamdy Elsayed
President Egyptian Medical Syndicate
Egypt

Professor Mahmoud Elshandidi
Professor of Paediatrics
Cairo, Egypt

Professor Zafar Hussain
Medical Microbiology
Canada

Dr Jackie Applebee
Medical Foundation for Victims
of Torture, London, UK

Dr Sylvia Watkins
Medical Oncologist
Stevenage, UK

Dr Fady Joudah

Internal Medicine
Houston, USA

Dr Brian Robinson
Psychiatrist
Milton Keynes, UK

Dr Sam Richmond
Consultant Neonatologist
Sunderland, UK

Professor Hamed
Oakton College
Illinois, USA

Dr John Bell
Medical Foundation for
Victims of Torture, London, UK

Dr Elizabeth Gordon
Consultant Surgeon
London, UK

Dr Andrew Rouse
Public Health Physician
Birmingham, UK

Dr A. Peer
Med Microbiologist
Durban, South Africa

Dr Janine Molleyres
Internal Medicine
Ecoteaux, Switzerland

Dr Mona Hamed Imam
El Nadim Centre for Rehabilitation
of Victims of Torture - Cairo, Egypt

Dr Ayman El Badry
Rheumatology & Rehabilitation
Gaza, Palestine

Dr Omar Mangoush
Thoracic Surgeon
London, UK

Dr Andy Oxman
Norwegian Knowledge Centre
for Health Services, Oslo, Norway

Dr Jesse Soodalter
Brown University Medical School
Providence, Rhode Island, USA

Dr Diana Warner
GP
Bristol, UK

Dr Francis Nathan
Senior Visiting Ophthalmologist
Adelaide, Australia

Dr Ahmed Almari
Radiologist
Bradford, UK

Dr Colin Brewer
Research Director
London, UK

Dr Debbie Goldman
GP
Oxford, UK

Dr Jamel Turkey
Psychiatrist
Tunisia

Dr Ranjeet Brar
Vascular Surgical Research Registrar
London, UK

Dr Hashem Jaddou
Faculty of Medicine
Jordan University of Science & Tech.
Irbid, Jordan

Dr Gabor Mate
Family Practice
Vancouver, Canada

Dr Jalaluddin Soni
GP
Johannesburg, South Africa

Dr Anna Livingstone
Honorary Senior Lecturer in General Practice
London, UK

Dr Abdul Sattar Majzoub
Ophthalmology
Canada

Dr Haidar Dekmak
Chief Anaesthetics & Resuscitation
Canada

Dr M M Al Hasan
Primary Care
South Africa

Dr Najat Khenyab
Chief, Obstetrics & Gynaecology
Canada

Dr Adriano Sassi
President Centrale Sanitaria Svizzera
Switzerland

Dr Felicity de Zulueta
Consultant Psychiatrist
London, UK

Dr Hadil Kamal
Periodontal Surgeon
Ramallah, Palestine

Dr Kathleen Panama
GP
London, UK

Dr Alaoui Driss
Psychiatry
Canada

Dr Abdullah Abba
Pulmonology
Canada

Dr David Toowara
GP
Hemel Hempstead, UK

Dr Rand Askalan
Paediatric Neurology
Toronto, Canada

Dr Bharathi Kamineni

Family Practice
New York, USA

Dr Gill Yudkin
GP
London, UK

Dr Mamdouh El-Adl
Consultant Psychiatrist
Northampton, UK

Dr Muhammad Dadibhai
GP Registrar
Dewsbury, UK

Dr B Farkat
Gastroenterologist
Beirut, Lebanon

Dr Charles Essex
Consultant Paediatrician
Leamington Spa, UK

Dr Mohamed Ali
Internal Medicine
Leicester, UK

Dr Paola Canarutto
General Medicine
Turin, Italy

Dr Samir Mourad
Psychiatrist
Case Western University
Cleveland, USA

Dr Nazim Merchant
Consultant Maxillo-Facial Surgeon
Ayr, UK

Dr Nibal Lubbad
Family Medicine
Toronto, Canada

Dr Omer Faruk Gergerlioglu
Chest Physician
Association of Human Rights & Solidarity
for Oppressed People
Ankara, Turkey

Dr Ranjit Mani
Neurologist
Rockville, USA

Dr Feras Mustafa
Psychiatrist
Northampton, UK

Dr Tarik Al-Kubaisy
Consultant Psychiatrist
Lincolnshire, UK

Dr Shahid Latif
Consultant Psychiatrist
Northampton, UK

Dr Arthur Hertzberg
Specialist General Practice
& Community Medicine, Oslo, Norway

Dr Luisella Grandori
Paediatrician
Modena, Italy

Dr Luay Kafienah
Old Age Psychiatry
UK

Dr David Crowley
GP
Moray, UK

Dr Siri Slastad
Consultant Occupational Medicine
Trondheim, Norway

Dr Wael Hakmeh
Emergency Medicine Physician
Detroit, USA

Dr Murat Coskun
Child & Adolescent Psychiatrist
Istanbul, Turkey

Dr M Asmal
Boston, USA

Dr Mouna Ghanem
Medical Resident
Damascus, Syria

Dr Rohana Jaafar
Lecturer in Paediatrics
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Dr Qasim Borhat
GP
Soweto, South Africa

Dr Catriona Morton
General Practice
Edinburgh, UK

Dr Peter Kandela
GP
London, UK

Dr Christianne Kolberg
Psychiatrist
Tromsø, Norway

Dr Marco Chiesa
Director, Personality Disorder Research
London, UK

Dr Amin El Hihi
Consultant Psychiatrist
Manchester, UK

Dr Martin Birnstingl
Consultant Surgeon
London, UK

Dr Susan Rosenthal
Ontario, Canada

Dr K Khan
GP
Croydon, UK

Dr Ian Whetter
Family Physician
Quebec, Canada

Dr Ashraf Jedaar
Forensic Psychiatrist
Cape Town, South Africa

Dr Ayman Aboguddah

Director of Echocardiography
Regina, Canada

Dr Zeenath Asma
Associate Pathologist
Illinois, USA

Dr Maria Luisa Agnolio
Family Doctor
Sandrigo, Italy

Dr Nadia Al Hawashim
Consultant Pathologist
Saudi Arabia

Dr M T Bailony
Paediatrics
San Diego, USA

Dr Sarwat W Ahmad
Psychiatry
North Carolina, USA

Dr El Hattab El Ibrahimy Youssef
Ear, Nose & Throat
Taroudant, Morocco

Dr Linn Abusalameh
Paediatrics
Cardiff, UK

Dr Nayef Agel
Medical Consultant
London, UK

Dr Hoda Makkawi
Clinical Assistant Professor
Family Medicine, Canada

Dr Sarwat Sadek
Examiner for Royal College of Surgeons
of England, Taunton, UK

Dr Sabur Malek
Trauma & Orthopaedics
Swansea, UK

Dr Magdi El-Guindi
Consultant Orthopaedic Surgeon
Buckingham, UK

Dr Tariq Khan
Cardiac Surgery
London, UK

Dr Estela Welldon
Consultant Psychiatrist
London, UK

Dr Gabe Woollam
Family Medicine
Goose Bay, Canada

Dr Robert Haynes
Cardiology
Washington State, USA

Dr Zahra Kassam
Oncologist
Toronto, Canada

Dr Nadia Dabbagh
Child Psychiatrist
London, UK

Dr Mahmoud El-Wasify
Psychiatrist
Egypt

Dr Haroun Patel
Urologist
Durban, South Africa

Dr Rola Alkurdi
Anaesthetist
London, UK

Dr Gamal Mohamed Hassan
Consultant Psychiatrist
UK

Dr Shuaib Mangra
Occupational Health/Sports Medicine
Cape Town, South Africa

Dr Simonetta Pagliani
General Medicine
Milan, Italy

Dr Sare Davutoglu
Consultant Obstetrician & Gynaecologist
Istanbul, Turkey

Dr Filippo Bianchetti
Family Medicine
Varese, Italy

Professor Amina Balafrej
Paediatrician
Rabat, Morocco

Dr Salam Ismael
Doctors for Iraq
Baghdad, Iraq

Dr Adam Forman
GP
London, UK

Dr Merlin Willcox
GP
Oxford, UK

Dr Sally Reynolds
GP
Oxford, UK

Dr Ibrahim Omari
Family Medicine
American University of Beirut
Lebanon

Dr Aslam Bhorat
Urologist
Glenwood, South Africa

Dr Zeinab Abrong
Psychiatrist
Tunisia

Dr A Basyuni
Orthopaedic Surgeon
Cairo, Egypt

Dr K. El Farra
Consultant Gynaecologist
Hertfordshire, UK

Dr M. Namazie
Anaesthetist
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Dr Mikram Malik MBE
GP
Lancashire, UK

Dr As'ad Bhorat
Family Physician
South Africa

Qasim Bhorat
GP
South Africa

Dr R Ismail
GP
South Africa

Dr Z. Goondiwala
Family Physician
Johannesburg, South Africa

Dr George Nossar
Specialist Occupational Medicine
New South Wales, Australia

Dr Amr Salem
Ear, Nose & Throat
Leicester, UK

Prof M Darrat
Assistant Professor, Anaesthesia
Hamilton, Canada

Raymond Brown
Consultant Paediatrician
Buckinghamshire, UK

Dr Marco Albonico
Specialist Infectious Diseases
Turin, Italy

Dr Nabil Sultan
Chief Nephrology Fellow
Univ. of Western Ontario, Canada

Dr Mohammed Naji
Anaesthetist
Virginia, USA

Dr Maged Agour
Psychiatrist
Cambridge, UK

Dr Fahed Al-Daour
GP trainee
Mansfield, UK

Dr Duaa Bakri Saeed
Internist
Blackburn, UK

Dr Nabil Asfour
Internal medicine
Saskatoon, Canada

Dr Khalid Al Wahhabi
General Surgeon
Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Dr M C Solwa
Family Physician
Durban, South Africa

Dr George Longstreth
Gastroenterologist
San Diego, USA

Dr Ahmed Manjra
Paediatrician
Westville, South Africa

Dr Suleiman Nayal
Gastroenterologist
Canada

Dr Bouchamma Sakina
Endocrinology
Canada

Dr Olivier Dezeustre
Rheumatology
Canada

Dr Grabois
Stomatology
Canada

Dr Said Sellam
Medecin General, Emergency Medicine
Canada

Dr Ismail Jalili
Ophthalmologist
Stamford, UK

Dr Arti Maini
London, UK

Dr Luay Kafienah
Walsall, UK

Dr Manaf Ubaidat
Bathurst, Canada

Dr Dina Al Khatib
Bathurst, Canada

Dr Omer Moghraby
Child & Adolescent Psychiatry
London, UK

Dr Shasnkhar Vijayodeva
Harrow, UK

Dr Nazem Alzalam
Family Medicine
Pediatrics, Canada

Dr Joseph El-Khoury
Adult Psychiatrist
Oxford, UK

Dr Hashim Reza
General Psychiatry
London, UK

Dr Tayyeb Tahir
Consultant Liaison Psychiatrist
University Hospital of Wales, UK

Dr Sadia Malick
Clinical Lecturer
Birmingham University, UK

Dr Hanif Awan
Accident & Emergency Registrar
Oldham, UK

Dr Mario Valpe
Specialist in General Medicine
Rome, Italy

Dr Yasser Tolba
Academic Dept of Anaesthesia
Intensive Care, Birmingham, UK

Dr Wilfred Sircus
Gastroenterologist
St. Andrews, UK

Dr Santa di Prima
Internist
Turin, Italy

Dr Simon Lewin
Public Health
Oslo, Norway

Dr Tia MacGregor
GP
Oxford, UK

Dr Roberto Ruani
Psychiatrist
Bologna, Italy

Dr Clementina Peris
Gynaecological Endocrinology
Turin, Italy

Dr Miriam Garfinkle
Family Physician
Toronto, Canada

Dr Piersabatino Deola
Italy

Dr Talib Abbas
Consultant Psychiatrist
Kent, UK

Dr Jonathan Fluxman
GP
UK

Dr Paul Lévesque
Chargé d'enseignement clinique
Emergency Physician

Dr Berry Beaumont
GP
London, UK

Dr Edward Morris
General Practitioner
Witney, UK

Dr Alaa Dekis
Resident, Internal Medicine
Quebec, Canada

Montréal, Canada

Dr Sakeer Hussain
USA

Dr Ahmed Elsehety
Southwestern Institute
of Neurology, Texas, USA

Dr Saskeer Hussain
Haematology & Oncology
Council Bluffs, USA

Dr Samir Monir
USA

Dr Radi Ahmad
Consultant Nephrologist
Amman, Jordan

Dr Ali Hadi
Consultant Psychiatrist
Luton UK

Dr Arid Bjorndal
Public Health
Oslo, Norway

Dr Paul Malone
Plastic Surgery
Manchester, UK

Dr Esperanza Diaz
General Practice
Bergen, Norway

Dr David Dash
Cardiothoracic Medicine
Canada

Dr Sarah Zaher
Ophthalmology
London, UK

Dr Samir Shaheen-Hussain
Paediatrics
Montreal, Canada

Dr Omar Abu-Hijleh
Consultant Endocrinologist
Amman, Jordan

Dr Giuliana Bondielli
General Medicine
Massa, Italy

Dr Jose Tallon Aviles
Family Doctor
Irun, Spain

Dr Olav Thorssen
Stavanger, Norway

Dr Juan Enrique Cimas
Family Doctor
Asturias, Spain

Dr Mohammad Habbal
Consultant Physician
Damman, Saudi Arabia
Ass Professor Hakon Lasse Leira
Dept of Occupational Medicine
St Olav University Hospital, Norway

Professor Spiro Tams
Professor of Dermatology
Jerusalem, Israel

Professor Andrew Zweifler
Professor of Internal Medicine
Michigan, USA

Professor Ammar Al-Chalabi

**Professor of Neurology
& Complex Disease Genetics**
London, UK

Dr David Bell
President elect
British Psychoanalytic Society
London, UK

Professor Warren Gold
Professor of Medicine
San Francisco, USA

Professor Mamoun Kremli
Paediatric Orthopaedics
Riyadh, South Arabia

Professor Rayaz Malik
Professor of Medicine
Manchester, UK

Professor Frederico Allodi
Consultant Psychiatrist
Toronto, Canada

Professor Jamil Fayez
Microsurgery & Laser Surgery specialist
Washington DC, USA

Professor Faisal Mirza
Dept of Orthopaedic Surgery
Stanford University, USA

Professor Hisham Mehanna
Hon Professor/Consultant Surgeon
Coventry, UK

Professor Ahmed Shabaik
Professor of Pathology
University of California, USA

Professor Morten Lindbaek
Professor of General Practice
University of Oslo, Norway

Professor Louis Reynolds
School of Child & Adolescent Health
University of Cape Town, South Africa

Professor Errol Holland
Executive Dean, Health Sciences
Medical University of South Africa
Limpopo, South Africa

Professor Tom Hutchinson
Professor of Medicine
McGill University, Canada

Professor Franco Cavalli
Immediate Past President
International Union Against Cancer
Switzerland

Professor Suzanna Moreno
Dept of Clinical Science
Rome, Italy

Professor Ellen Isaacs
New York Medical College
Youken, USA

Professor Vimala Isaac
Professor of Obstetrics & Gynaecology
Canberra, Australia

Professor Noha Abokrysha
Neurology
Cairo University, Egypt

Dr Mads Gilbert
Trauma Surgeon
Tromso, Norway

Professor Aneez Esmail
Professor of General Practice
University of Manchester, UK

Professor Mohammed Abou-Saleh
Professor of Addictions Psychiatry
London, UK

Dr Swee Ang
Orthopaedic & Trauma
Consultant Surgeon, London, UK

Professor Mohamed El-Fakharany
Assist Professor of Pathology
Wayne State University
Detroit, Michigan, USA

Professor Brian Johnston
Carnegie Mellon University
Pittsburgh, USA

Prof Said Osman
Assistant Professor
Diagnostic Radiology
London, Canada

Professor Radwan Banimustafa
Consultant Psychiatrist Amman, Jordan

Professor Aida Seif El Dawla
Professor of Psychiatry
Ain Shams University, Cairo, Egypt

Dr Eyad El Sarraj
Head, Gaza Community
Mental Health Programme, Palestine

Professor Phil Thomas
Centre for Ethnicity & Health
University of Central Lancashire, UK

Professor Marwan Hariz
Neurosurgery
University College London
UK

Professor Munir Gharaibeh
Professor of Pharmacology
University of Jordan

Professor Ibrahim Mohamed
Neonatology, Pediatrics
Montreal, Canada

Professor Norbert
Medicine
Montreal, Canada

Dr Derek Summerfield
Honorary Senior Lecturer
Institute of Psychiatry, King's College, UK

Professor Faisal Rehman
Professor of Medicine
London, Canada

Professor Ghaith Shubailat
Plastic surgery
Montreal, Canada

Professor Hala Makhoul
Professor of Pathology
Ain Shams University
Cairo, Egypt

Professor Abida Haque
Professor of Pathology
Houston, USA

Professor Khalifa Ghenghesh
Al-Fateh University for Medical Science
Tripoli, Libya

Professor Hossam Fadel
Clin. Prof. Obstetrics & Gynaecology
Medical College of Georgia, USA

Professor Hafeez ur Rahman
Peshawar Medical College
Pakistan

Professor Ismail Rammouz
Faculty of Medicine
Fez, Morocco

Professor Abdulkarim Ebrahim
Professor of Psychiatry
Bahrain

Dr Marc Sapir
Ret Medical Director
California, USA

Dr Lee Cranberg
Neurologist
Harvard, Boston, USA

Dr Kambiz Boomla
Senior Clin. Lecturer
University of London, UK

Dr Flavia Donati
Psychiatrist
Rome, Italy

Dr Nuri Gene-Cos
Consultant Psychiatrist
London, UK

Dr Sushrut Jadhav
Consultant Psychiatrist
London, UK

Dr Ghada Awad
Obstetrics & Gynaecology
Auckland, New Zealand

Dr Azad Mashari
Resident Physician in Anaesthesia
University of Toronto, Canada

Dr Shazia Malik
Consultant Obstetrics & Gynaecology
London, UK

Dr Abdulaziz Zorgani
Medical Microbiologist
Tripoli, Libya

Dr Susanne Yound

Anaesthetist
Glasgow, UK

Dr Sam Noumoff
McGill University
California, USA

Dr Ahmed El-Laboudi
Diabetes
Leeds, UK

Dr Colin McKean
GP
Liverpool, UK

Dr Adib Essali
Consultant Psychiatrist
Damascus, Syria

Dr Bassem Saab
Programme Director Family Medicine
American University Beirut,
Lebanon

Dr Sarah Wakeman
Brown Medical School
Rhode Island, USA

Dr Bilal Farhat
Gastroenterology
Beirut, Lebanon

Dr Khalid Mansour
Consultant Psychiatrist
Essex, UK

Dr Nicholas Batley
Emergency Medicine
American University Beirut
Lebanon

Dr Muneer Deeb
Consultant General Surgeon
Kassel, Germany

Dr Khalil Elbayouk
Rugby, UK

Dr Tom Marshall
Senior Lecturer in Public Health
University of Birmingham, UK

Dr Martin Birnstingl
Consultant Surgeon
London, UK

Dr Osama Omari
General Surgeon
Canada

Dr Roland Farhi
Brussels, Belgium

Dr Mahnaz Hashmi
Psychiatrist
London, UK

Dr Samer Jabbour
Senior Lecturer
Faculty of Health Sciences
American University Beirut, Lebanon

Dr Malika Sharma
Internal Medicine

Toronto, Canada

Dr Bassam Odeh
Consultant Haematologist
Damascus, Syria

Dr Akkache Abd Nacer
General Surgery
Blida, Algeria

Dr Ahmed Elmeshhedany
Clinical Haematology
Hawler Medical University
Irbil, Iraq

Dr Huda Salman
Pathologist
Penang, Malaysia

Dr Husni Al-Robb
Consultant Psychiatrist
Northampton, UK

Dr Harry Williams
Psychiatrist
Ontario, Canada

Dr Mohsin Moola
GP
Dublin, Eire

Dr Ahmed Rashad
Paediatric Specialist
Saudi Arabia

Professor Hana Soliman
Psychiatry
Rochester, UK

Dr Ireo Bono
Oncology Specialist
University of Genoa, Italy

Dr Henrik Pelling
Psychiatrist
Uppsala, Sweden

Dr Mazen El-Khairy
Gaza, Palestine

Dr Sameh El-Kawy
Consultant Orthopaedic Surgeon
Warwick, UK

Dr Anand Trip
Neurologist
London, UK

Dr Lara El Zahabi
General Medicine
Toronto, Canada

Dr Ron Singer
GP
London, UK

Dr Minella de Souza
Psychiatry
University of Toronto, Canada

Dr Ian Kerr
Consultant Psychiatrist
Coatbridge, UK

Dr Paul Malone

UK

Dr Gilberto Calzolari
Internal Medicine
Turin, Italy

Professor Allie Moosa
Paediatrician
Cape Town, South Africa

Dr Shakir Alani
Physician
Leeds, UK

Dr Saleh El-Hilu
General Adult Psychiatrist
West Bromwich, UK

Dr Shereen Habib
GP
Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Dr Guido Ginstetta
Family Medicine
Pino Torinese, Italy

Dr Simon Quinn
London, UK

Dr Farhana Lockhat
GP
UK

Dr Shuaib Manjra
Chairman, Trauma Centre for Survivors of
Violence and Torture
Cape Town, South Africa

Dr Jo Moncrieff
Senior Lecturer Social Psychiatry
University College London, UK

Dr Saleyha Ahsan
Internist
London, UK

Dr Syira Ahsan
GP
London, UK

Dr Saima Ahsan
Internist
London, UK

Dr Hisham Tassi
Chief Medical Officer
Internal Medicine
Thompson, Canada

Dr Ramzy Wahhab
Internal Medicine
Mount Royal, Canada

Dr Maha Almahmudi
Radiation Oncology
Hamilton, Toronto, Canada

Dr Dahlia Wasfi
USA

Dr Waleed Libda
Clinical Toxicology, Canada

Dr Warren Bell
President, Medical Staff, Family Med.

Shuswap Lake General Hospital
Salmon Arm, Canada

Dr Ghassan Joundi
Dermatology
Winnipeg, Canada

Dr Sahar Khorsheed
Pediatric Gastroenterology
Ancaster, Canada

Dr Rahmah Rasat
Paediatrics
University Kebangsaan, Malaysia

Dr Stephen Cummings
American Board of Family Medicine
Hope Valley, USA

Dr Barry Mohamed Atik
Medecine Generale
Khouribga, Morocco

Hisham Thabet
Ophthalmology
Essen, Germany

Abdel-Raouf Ismail
Plastic Surgery
Dhahran, Saudi Arabia

Dr E Sayed
Family Practice
Welland, Canada

Dr Raisa Malik
GP
Lancashire, UK

Dr Mark Struthers
GP/ Prison Medicine
Bedford, UK

Dr Ibrahim Hanif Awan
UK

Dr Jamil Gharaba
Surgery
Padua, Italy

Dr Alfonso Coletta
Anaesthetist
Forence, Italy

Dr Essam Hassan
Consultant Psychiatrist
Milton Keynes, UK

Dr Jill Donnelly
Consultant Surgeon
Hereford, UK

Dr Fouad Alani
Associate Specialist in Medicine
Blackburn, UK

Dr Raied Haris
General Medicine
Blackburn, UK

Dr Sukaina Hirji
GP
Harrow, UK

Dr Jan ter Laak
Senior Lecturer
Utrecht, Netherlands

Dr Sue Black
GP
Bristol, UK

Dr Teresa Poltronieri
Medical Psychotherapist
Rovigo, Italy

Dr Clyde Farris
Orthopaedic Surgeon
Oregon, USA

Dr Patrick Boyd
Consultant Urologist
London, UK

Dr Aideen Naughton
Consultant Paediatrician
Abergavenny, UK

Dr Hellme Najim
Consultant Psychiatrist
Basildon, UK

Dr Faysal El-Kak
Senior Lecturer
American University Beirut, Lebanon

Dr Shahnaz Aslam
Karachi, Pakistan

Dr Naseer Nuaman
GP
Dartford, UK

Dr Marwa Shoeb
Radiologist
London, UK

Dr Marryum Hussain
Consultant Psychiatrist
Liverpool, UK

Dr Susan Kurien
Psychiatrist
London, UK

Dr Bianca Fossati
General medicine
Monza, Italy

Dr Karam Jayyousi
Palestine

Dr Laila Obeid
Paediatric trainee
Canada

Dr Alberto Martin
General Surgeon
Girona, Spain

Dr Tsepo Motsohi
Family Medicine
Cape Town, South Africa

Dr Jill Austin
Anaesthetist
Aberdeen, UK

Dr Marie-Claire Calothy-Abram

Child Psychiatrist
Orsay, France

Dr Ani Zainudden
Consultant Obstetrician & Gynaecologist
University Kebangsaan Malaysia
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Dr Efrossini Moureli
Psychiatrist
Thessaloniki, Greece

Dr Muhammad Hussein
Canada

Dr Yasmin Jabr
Montreal, Canada

Dr Magda Adly
Anaesthetist
Cairo, Egypt

Dr Kamal Al-Tawil
Cairo, Egypt

Dr Hina Ansari
UK

Dr Christiana Sessa
Oncology
Bellinzona, Switzerland

Dr Shameen Oliviera
Respiratory Medicine
UK

Dr Mahmoud Sehwal
General Director
Treatment & Rehabilitation Centre
Ramallah, Palestine

Dr Susan Sohonfield
Public Health
London, UK

Dr Sabba Maqbool
Gastroenterologist
Philadelphia, USA

Dr Amin ur Rahman
Birmingham, UK

Dr Salah A Kouta
Consultant Endocrinologist
Bury, UK

Dr Adel Elalfy
Physician
Staffordshire, UK

Dr Ghassan Alami
Orthopaedic Surgery
Montreal, Canada

Dr Julia Aram
Consultant Neurologist
Brighton, UK

Dr Ahmad Kamal
Orthopaedic Surgeon
Irbid, Jordan

Dr Hyman Sam Glatt
GP
Sunderland, UK

Dr Angelo Stefanini
Dept. of Medicine & Pub. Health
University of Bologna, Italy

Dr Shahnaz Anwar
General Physician
Karachi, Pakistan

Dr Hussein Nagi
Consultant in Pain Management
Birmingham, UK

Dr Hoda Mer
Dept of Pathology/Laboratory Med.
New Jersey Medical School, USA

Dr Mohammed Yunus
Internal Medicine
Florida, USA

Dr Zein Khairullah
Hospital Director
Aleppo, Syria

Dr Tim Khater
Ophthalmologist
Texas, USA

Dr Malcolm Dow
Medicine
Derby, UK

Dr Sharof Ibrahim
Paediatric Orthopaedic Surgeon
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Dr F Shaikh
GP
Durban, South Africa

Dr J Qadri
Obstetrics & Gynaecology
Orlando, USA

Dr Fahmida Chowdhury
Clinical Research Fellow in Epilepsy
King's College, London UK

Dr Basil Ridha
Neurology Registrar
London, UK

Dr Sam Fateema
Internal Medicine
Pennsylvania, USA

Dr Ghizlane Zoulati
GP
Taza, Morocco

Dr Zakaria Siddiqui
Psychiatry
Omaha, USA

Dr Masood Ansari
Internal & Emergency Medicine
Tampa, USA

Dr Ismail Kaloul
Anaesthetics
Val-d'or, Canada

Dr Tareq Aldabbas

Neurology
Czech Republic

Dr Habib Rahman
Consultant Surgeon in Trauma
& Orthopaedics, Solihull, UK

Dr Rafael Gracia Ballarin
Family Physician
Alava, Spain

Dr A M Faghihi
Radiology
London, UK

Dr Muin Fedah
Director, In Vitro Fertilisation
& Genetics Centre, Amman, Jordan

Dr Fouad Siddiqui
Consultant Physician
Birmingham, UK

Dr F Rahman
Pathologist
Nova Scotia, Canada

Dr Masood Shariff
Psychiatry Residency
Philadelphia, USA

Dr Sheraz Butt
Copenhagen, Denmark

Dr Mariaguilia Agnoletto
Psychiatrist
Milan, Italy

Dr Bilal Butt
GP
Rochdale, UK

Dr Nadeem Jilani
Specialist Registrar in Paediatrics
Manchester, UK

Dr Zeyn Green-Thompson
Specialist Registrar
Cambridge, UK

Dr Urfan Zahoor Amed
Copenhagen, Denmark

Dr Giovanni Pettenella
GP
Verona, Italy

Dr Jawad Yahya Hadi
Cons. Internist & Cardiologist
Amman, London

Dr Achilla D'Anna
General Medicine
Milan, Italy

Dr Jane Hamilton
Consultant Perinatal Psychiatrist
West Lothian, UK

Dr Adi Hadi
Consultant Psychiatrist
Luton, UK

Dr Umar Abdulaziz
Nigeria

Dr Anna Athow
Consultant Surgeon
London, UK

Dr Ahmed Bayoumi
Internal Medicine
University of Toronto, Canada

Dr Bahaa Ghalayani
Head of Department
Al Awda Hospital, Gaza, Palestine

Dr Mazen El-Zibdeh
Senior Consultant
Obstetrics & Gynaecology
Amman, Jordan

Dr Ohnmar John
GP
Melbourne, Australia

Dr N Naggar
President of Arabmed
Freiberg, Germany

Dr Safiya Ahsan
Internist
London, UK

Dr Ibrahim Taher
Consultant Microbiologist
Ottawa, Canada

Dr Layth Yahya Ibrahim
King Hussein Cancer Centre
Amman, Jordan

Dr Yamina Quahrani
Resuscitation Medicine
Blida, Algeria

Dr D. Allouache
Surgeon
Blida, Algeria

Dr Zouhir Afiane
Surgery
Blida, Algeria

Dr Omar Benmeberik
Surgical Resident
Blida, Algeria

Dr Fatiha Kadri
General Medicine
Blida, Algeria

Dr Zeidu Fodhil
Surgery
Blida, Algeria

Dr Kartina Noor
Clinical Microbiology
University Kebangsaan, Malaysia

Dr H. Medjdoub
Surgeon
Blida, Algeria

Dr Rachid Elghribi
Physician
Blida, Algeria

Dr Salwa Abu Afieh

Family Physician
Canada

Dr Sharif Nasr
President, Diagnostic Informatics
New Jersey, USA

Dr Zeeshan Ramzan
Fellow in Gastroenterology
Philadelphia, USA

Saren Azer
Clinical Investigator
Respiratory Medicine, Canada

Dr Jay Brophy
Cardiology & Epidemiology
Montreal, Canada

Dr Shehnaz Nadir Ali
Ex. Head of Paediatrics Dept.
Surrey, Canada

Dr Asmal Bil
Professional Lead Surgeon
Neurosurgery, Canada

M.Tabib
Radiology
Windsor, Canada

Dr Shazia Peer
Ear, Nose, Throat Registrar
Cape Town, South Africa

Dr Nazia Peer
Registrar in Public Health
Cape Town, South Africa

Dr Rachid Omar
Neurology
Tripoli, Lebanon

Dr Rachid Mohamad
Neurology
Tripoli, Lebanon

Dr Abomohammad Hawarey
Consultant Ophthalmic Surgeon
Amman, Jordan

Dr Waseem Barham
King Hussein Cancer Center
Amman, Jordan

Dr Ritika Goel
Family Medicine
Toronto, Canada

Dr Kamel Afifi
Orthopaedics
Amman, Jordan
Professor Edwin Daniel
Professor Emeitus of Pharmacology
University of Alberta, Canada

Professor Mohammed Tikly
Professor of Rheumatology
University of Witwatersrand
Johannesburg, South Africa

Professor Raif Geha
Professor of Paediatrics
Harvard, Boston, USA

Professor Cesar Mondragon
National University of San Marcos
Lima, Peru

Dr Hans Husum
Surgeon, Tromso Mine Victim Resource Centre
University of Northern Norway

Professor Ayman Chamma
Professor of Medicine
Point-Claire, Canada

Professor M Miqdady
Pediatric Gastroenterology
Canada

Professor Derek Hellenberg
Family Medicine
Cape Town, South Africa

Professor Gene Feder
Academic Unit of Primary Health Care
University of Bristol, UK

Professor Pat Coll
Clinical Associate/Professor
University of Calgary, Canada

Prof Tina Dobsevage
Mount Sinai School of Medicine
New York, USA

Professor Sami Kaidbey
Assist Professor of Cardiology
American University of Beirut
Lebanon

Professor Paul Hamel
Director, Health Studies
University of Toronto, Canada

Professor Nizar Maraqa
Paediatrics
University of Florida
Jacksonville, USA

Professor Mounir Hanna Samy
Psychiatrist
McGill University, Montreal, Canada

Professor Michele Ghielmini
Head, Medical Oncology
Oncol. Inst.of Southern Switzerland

Professor Marcel-Francis Kahn
Emeritus Professor of Medicine
Paris, France

Professor Michael Benny
Associate Professor of Medicine
Vienna, USA

Professor Hosny Selim
Clinical Associate, Radiation
Oncologist, New York USA

Professor Abdelmajid Saari
Surgery
Blida, Algeria

Professor Tony Davies
Zambia School of Medicine
Lusaka, Zambia

Dr William Slaughter

Clinical Instructor in Psychiatry
Harvard, Cambridge, USA

Professor Aibah Osman
Public Health
Beirut, Lebanon

Professor Susy Kurian
Pathology
Vellore, India

Professor Hosny Selim
Radiation Oncology
New York, USA

Professor Gilles Bertschy
Professor of Psychiatry
Geneva, Switzerland

Professor Pierre Biron
Clinical Pharmacology
Canada

Prof Gilles Desroches
Assistant Professor
Ophthalmology
Ottawa, Canada

Professor Ehsan Fahmy
Professor of Psychiatry
Egypt

Dr Paquita de Zulueta
Honorary Senior Clinical Lecturer
Medical Ethics & Law
London, UK

Dr Susan Fayad
Psychiatrist
El Nadim Centre for Rehabilitation
of Victims of Violence, Cairo Egypt

Dr Ghada Karmi
Senior Lecturer
Exeter University, UK

Dr Asad Khan
Respiratory Physician
Blackburn, UK
Professor Mohamed Hatta Shaharom
Consultant Psychiatrist
Malaysia

Professor Ismail Zayid
Halifax, Canada

Dr Jonathan Dare
Consultant Child & Adolescent
Psychiatrist, London UK

Dr Nahed Mikki
Paediatrician
Ramallah, Palestine

Dr David Leighton
Consultant Ophthalmologist
Bethlehem, Palestine

Dr Joanna Santa Barbara
Child Psychiatrist
Motueka, New Zealand

Dr Alain Pernet
Specialist Internal Medicine
Geneva, Switzerland

Dr James Deutsch
Department of Psychiatry
University of Toronto, Canada

Dr Ana Sanchez
Obstetrics & Gynaecology
Newport Beach, USA

Dr Robert Shearer
Urological Surgeon
Somerset, UK

Dr Malila Noone
Microbiologist
Darlington, UK

Dr Daniel McQueen
Psychotherapy Specialist Registrar
London, UK

Dr Helen McColl
Rehabilitation Centre for Torture
Copenhagen, Denmark

Dr William Dienst
Family & Emergency Physician
Washington State, USA

Dr Alaa Hasan Alsadadi
Consultant Psychiatrist
Bahrain

Dr Sajida Ajjawi
Obstetrics & Gynaecology
Ramallah, Palestine

Dr Pam Wortley
GP
Sunderland, UK

Dr Ahmed Abou-Zeid
Neurosurgery
Manchester, UK

Dr Frank Arnold
Clinical Director, Medical Justice Network
Reading, UK

Dr Gerard Reissmann
GP
Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

Dr Axel Wannag
Occupational Physician
Bergen, Norway

Dr Elizabeth Dick
Consultant Radiologist
London, UK

Dr Maryam Navsa
Family Physician
University of Cape Town, South Africa

Dr Runa Mackay
Paediatrician
Edinburgh, UK

Dr Najib Safieddine
Fellow in Thoracic Surgery
Toronto, Canada

Dr Mahommed Siddique Tayob
Clinical Research Unit

Middelberg, South Africa

Dr Eric Brenman
Consultant Psychiatrist
London, UK

Dr Laure Sayyed Kassem
Internal Medicine
Cleveland, USA

Dr Bajes Hamad
Consultant Paediatric Nephrologist
Qatar

Dr Shabbir Amanullah
Psychiatrist
Charlottetown, Canada

Dr Ghassan Al Amar
Internal Medicine
American University Beirut
Lebanon

Dr Nazim Ismail
Consultant Medical Microbiologist
Pretoria, South Africa

Dr I Osman
GP
Durban, South Africa

Dr Numan Shah
Surgeon
Manchester, UK

Dr John Phillips
Consultant Paediatrician
Eniskillen, UK

Dr Salma Shebaik
California School of Medicine
University of San Diego, USA

Dr Talib Mearza
GP
Bedfordshire, UK

Dr Fatiha Kadri
General Medicine
Blida, Algeria

Hisham Thabet
Ophthalmology
Essen, Germany

Dr Shazad Amin
Consultant Psychiatrist
Manchester, UK

Dr L Azhar
Obstetrics
Canada

Dr Dina Al Khatib
Family Doctor
Bathurst, Canada

Dr Mohammad Abu Hilal
School of Medicine
Southampton University, UK

Dr Khalid Khabn
GP
Croydon, UK

Dr Ali Dabbagh
Ophthalmologist
Dubai

Dr Lydia Cairncross
General Surgeon
Cape Town, South Africa

Dr Deema Abdul Hadi
Family Physician
Canada

Dr Reem Abdul Hadi
Internal Medicine
Canada

Dr Imad Khreim
Psychiatrist
Mass., USA

Dr Hafez Alhous
Cardiology
Aberdeen, UK

Dr Chris Evans
Consultant Psychiatrist
Nottinghamshire, UK

Dr Brakat Sharabati
Pathologist
Hebron, Palestine

Dr Jonathan Flaxman
GP
London, UK

Dr Abbas Azadian
Psychiatrist
Toronto, Canada

Dr Majdy Shakkoura
Gaza, Palestine

Dr Nuzhat Sarfraz
GP
Billericay, UK

Dr Stephen Ginn
Psychiatrist
London UK

Dr Maha Elias
Consultant Anaesthetist
Weston-super-Mare, UK

Professor Sami Timimi
Faculty of Health & Social Sciences
Lincoln University, UK

Dr Sameh Hassan
Consultant Psychiatrist
Rugby, UK

Dr Rabih El Chammy
Psychiatrist
Beirut, Lebanon

Dr Tarek El-Gohary
Consultant Psychiatrist
Birmingham, UK

Dr Gianni Marin
Cardiology and Paediatrics
Trviso, Italy

Dr Ranio Abusamra
Paediatrician
London, UK

Dr Aynur Gormez
Psychiatrist
London, UK

Dr Biba Stanton
Cinical Lecturer Neurology Research
London, UK

Dr Faisals Suliman
GP
Durban, South Africa

Dr K. Jaffar
Consultant Psychiatrist
Basildon, UK

Dr Frederick Holmes
Urologist
Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK

Dr Aisha Sarwar
GP
Manchester, UK

Dr Goretta Bonacorsi
Ematologia
Modena, Italy

Dr Abdelmoniem Ali
Consultant Psychiatrist
Doncaster, UK

Dr Joan Giller
Area Medical Officer
Cork, Eire

Dr Shahid Salim
GP
Manchester, UK

Dr S Alani
Clinical Neurophysiology
Leeds, UK

Dr Catherine Houghton
Consultant Chest Physician
Bury, UK

Dr Gunhild Nybork
GP/Researcher
University of Oslo, Norway

Dr Bernardino Oliva Fanlo
Family Physician
Mallorca, Spain

Dr Klaus Melf
Assisting County Doctor
Tromso, Norway

Dr Nicholas Embleton
Consultant Neonatal Paediatrician
Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

Dr Heinz Eckel
Doctor and Sociologist
Berlin, Germany

Dr Dave Knight
Occupational Medicine
Cape Town, South Africa

Dr Fawad Zaman
Consultant Respiratory Physician
Burnley, UK

Dr Aroushka James
Psychiatry
London, UK

Dr John Vaughan
GP
North Haven, Australia

Dr Laurel Baldwin-Ragaven
Faculty of Health Sciences
University of Cape Town, South Africa

Dr Essack Mitha
Contract Clinical Research
Johannesburg, South Africa

Dr Manal Khorsheed
Family Medicine
Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

Dr Claire Jenkins
Consultant Psychiatrist
London, UK

Dr Sukaina Hirji
GP Registrar
St Albans, UK
Dr D F Annabi
Internist - Endocrinologist
Amman, Jordan

Dr Sonia Allam
Consultant Anaesthetist
Stirling, UK

Dr Ahmad Bakr
Paediatrician
Cairo, Egypt

Dr Shiroma De Silva Minor
Consultant Oncologist
UK

Dr Jalaluddin Soni
GP
Johannesburg, South Africa

Dr Khaled Fathy
Lecturer Internal Medicine
Ain Shams University, Cairo, Egypt

Dr M Al-Bustami
Consultant Cardiologist
Hertfordshire, UK

Dr Abdulla Bashir
General Surgeon
Amman, Jordan

Dr Azhar Aziz
Senior Consultant Emergency Physician
Doha, Qatar

Dr Faisal Moosa
Birmingham, UK

Dr R M Kajee

GP
Johannesburg, South Africa

Dr Neveen Elkholy
Family Practitioner
New Jersey, USA

Dr Wahaj-ud-Din Ahmad
Neurologist
North Carolina, USA

Dr Mahmoud Loubani
Bathurst, Canada

Dr Sara Loubani
Bathurst, Canada

Dr Eman Loubani
Ottawa, Canada

Dr Mohammed Loubani
Family Medicine
London, Canada

Dr Osama Loubani
Halifax, Canada

Dr Rhona MacDonald
Medical Journal Editor
London, UK

Dr Tarek Loubani
Montreal, Canada

Dr Imad Khreim
USA

Dr Sarfaraz Ahmad
Physician
Juvail, Saudi Arabia

Dr Enzo Farina
Dept of Surgery
Turin, Italy

Dr Adel Elmary
Cardiology
Alexandria, Egypt

Dr Monica Malventano
Family Paediatrics
Ferrara, Italy

Professor Hazem
Orthopaedic Surgery
Saudi Arabia

Dr Atyabi Haley
Family physician
Canada

Dr Aseel Hegazi
Genitourinary/HIV Medicine
London, UK

Dr Emad Fawzy
Anaesthesia/Intensive Treatment Unit
London, UK

Dr Hisham Al-Qassab
consultant Physician/Geriatrician
London, UK

Dr Zafir Hawa
Interventional Cardiologist
Kansas City, USA

Dr Mario Franzini
General Surgery
Reggio Emilia, Italy

Dr Diana Menzies
Consultant Psychiatrist
London, UK

Dr Ahmad Alramahi
Orthopaedic Surgeon
Amman, Jordan

Dr Jose Aparicio Garcia
Family Practitioner
Zafra, Spain

Dr Maged Sonkor
Consultant Physician
Birmingham, UK

Dr Liliana Perez
Anaesthetist
Buenos Aires, Argentina

Dr Heba Ghazy
Paediatrician
Ain Shams University
Cairo, Egypt

Dr Suhaila Ameer
Histopathologist
Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

Dr A A Mishal
Internist Endocrinologist
Amman, Jordan

Dr Roberto Maisto
Psychiatrist
Bologna, Italy

Dr Ali Al-Hakim
ENT surgery
Manchester, UK

Dr Aneesa Peer
Psychiatry
London, UK

Dr Gerhard Lotze
General Practitioner
Heidelberg, Germany

Dr Afra Al Dayel
Consultant Haematopathologist
Damman, Saudi Arabia

Professor Yahia Dajani
Consultant Pathologist
Amman, Jordan

Dr Ahmed Sabra
Intensive Care
Bristol, UK

Dr Tapanari Eleni
Paediatrician
Thessaloniki, Greece

Dr Bahoo Ghalayani
Al-Awda Hospital

Gaza, Palestine

Dr Jacqueline Le Corre
General Physician
Gonvix, France

Dr Elia Abi-Jaoude
Psychiatry
York, Canada

Dr Atalla Hamada
Plastic Surgery
Qatar

Dr Robert Dickson
Family Practitioner
Calgary, Canada

Dr Mohamed Khodr
Public Health
Virginia, USA

Dr Jamshid Marvasti
Child & Adult Psychiatrist
Manchester, USA

Dr Amal Shamma
Paediatrician
Kuwait

Dr M F Kamal
Jordan University
Amman, Jordan

Dr Maqsood Khan
Internal Medicine
Chicago, USA

Dr Ayman Askari
Consultant Rheumatologist
Sheffield, UK

Dr Sarimah Omar
Radiologist
Melaka, Malaysia

Dr Renza Martinelli
Occupational Medicine
Reggio Emilio, Italy

Dr Agnese Moro
Cardiologist & General Medicine
Treviso, Italy

Alfred Homsy
Anaesthesia
Cote-des-Neiges, Canada

Dr Beukhalifa Riadh
Psychiatry
Canada

Dr Iziki Abderrahim
General Medicine
Canada

Yashar Salek
Family Medicine
Willowdale, Canada

Dr Hassan Mostafa
Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery
London, Canada

Asif Kazmi
Pediatrics
Toronto, Canada

Dr Muhammad Shoib
Dermatology
Lahore, Pakistan

Dr Fasahat Wasty
Pathology
London, Canada

Dr Abde Ikhalek Beu Rejeb
France

Dr Adeel Mahmood
Family Medicine
Mississauga, Canada

M. A. Diwan
Ears, Nose & Throat
Guelph, Canada

François Milette
Pathology
Longueuil, Canada

Loraine Telleria
Medecine Familiale
Ville Saint-Pierre, Canada

Dr Carinne Minne
Consultant Forensic Psychiatrist
London, UK

Ahmed Ahmed
Chief of Standards Committee
Paediatrics
Thompson, Canada

Dr S Gardee
Family Practice
Ottawa, Canada

Dr Abdel-Nacer Akkache
Surgery
Blida, Algeria

Dr Jamila Khatri
Surgery
Blida, Algeria

Dr Farida Mokhtari
Resuscitation Medicine
Blida, Algeria

Dr Kamal Mattar
Urology
Toronto, Canada

Dr Ayesha Jafri
Office Medical Director
Rockville, USA

Dr Anthony Duerksen
Family Medicine
Toronto, Canada

Dr Hisham Alsher
Medical Technology/Physician
Toronto, Canada

Dr Walid Abdel Wahed

Gaza, Palestine

Dr William Ralph
USA

Dr Ibrahim Renno
Anaesthesiology
Shawinigan, Canada

Dr Lois Yelland
Medical Health Officer
Vancouver, Canada

Dr Georges Lévesque
Chargé d'enseignement clinique,
Université McGill, Médecine d'urgence
Notre-Dame-de-Grace, Canada

Dr John M Tallon
Emergency Medicine and Trauma
Halifax, Canada

Dr H M Azzam
Vice President for Medical Services
Obstetrics & Gynaecology
Thompson, Canada

Dr Michaela Beder
Psychiatry
Toronto, Canada

Dr Fayad Hamideh
Internal Medicine
Irvine, Canada

Dr Lalla Latifa Aboussiba
Gynaecologist, Medecin Legiste
Morocco

Dr Sajida Hussain
Pathology/Obstetrics
Pierrefonds, Canada

Neueen Elkholy
Family Practice
New Jersey, USA

Dr Basma El Mor
Psychiatrist
Cairo, Egypt

Dr Ragia el Gerzawi
Clinical Pathologist
Cairo, Egypt

Dr Raisa Malik
GP
Burnley, UK

Dr Manof Ubaidat
General Pathologist
Bathurst, Canada

Dr Shankar Vijaydeva
GP
UK

Dr Sameer Abdul Hadi
Family Physician
Canada

Dr Jeremy Isaacs
Neurology
London

Dr David Nicholl
Dept of Neurology
City Hospital
Birmingham, UK

Dr Abdulla Darwish
Pathologist
Bahrain

Dr Khalid Al-Abbadey
Consultant Psychiatrist
Hampshire, UK

Dr Shireen Kassam
Haematology
London UK

Dr K S Majeed
Forensic Psychiatrist
New Zealand

Dr Pau Perez
Psychiatrist, Hospital La Paz
Madrid, Spain

Dr Susan Schonfield
Public Health Consultant
London, UK

Dr Azhar Abdul Aziz
Consultant Emergency Physician
Doha, Qatar

Dr Eid Mustafa
Plastic Surgeon
Past President National Arab American Medical
Association
Wichita Falls, USA

Dr Mohd Abed Al Karkhi
Psychiatrist
Iraq

Dr Rofaat Shokeik
Gastroenterologist
Tripoli, Lebanon

Dr Gassan Maassarani
Neurology
Tripoli, Lebanon

Dr Hisham Solayman
Tripoli, Lebanon

Dr Hassan Masri
Anaesthetics
Tripoli, Lebanon

Dr Junaid Al Khaznachi
Internal Medicine
Amman, Jordan.

Dr Bernhard Klinghammer
Anaesthetics
Ronnenberg, Germany

Dr Saideh Khadir
Emergency Medicine
Saint-Lambert, Canada

Dr Juan Enrique Cimas
Family Doctor
Asturias, Spain

Dr Mohammad Habbal
Consultant Physician
Damman, Saudi Arabia

Dr Fouad Rifai
President, Islamic Medical Association,
Lebanon

Dr Georges Jalaby
MN Angels Clinic
Toledo, USA

Dr Lanny Smith
USA

Dr Veronica Chinchon
Psychiatry
London, UK