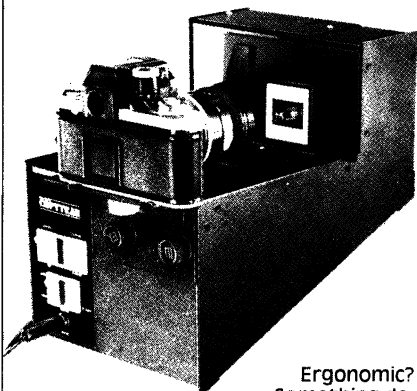


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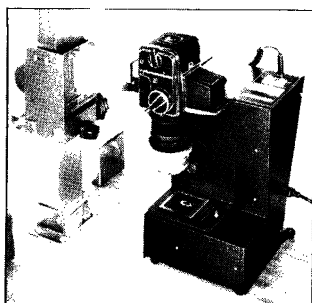


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## Health Rights in El Salvador

We wish to comment on the news article by John Walsh (4 Mar., p. 1047) about the accounts and conclusions from a fact-finding visit to El Salvador by two observers representing the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences. Our comments are especially timely in view of the recent plan by the Reagan Administration to send a team of military doctors to the country.

Walsh writes of political polarization that has "caused the deterioration of the El Salvadoran health care system," making it difficult for well-intentioned, apolitical scientific organizations such as the AAAS/National Academy of Sciences/Institute of Medicine, "congenitally shy of such politically charged situations," to do much to help. This is a lot like the ostrich's hiding its head in the sand. To ascribe the deterioration simply to political polarization (which certainly exists) is to ignore the well-documented fact that it is the government, not the rebel forces, that shut down the medical school and the national clinics, axed funds for food and nutrition, and is responsible for the harassment, disappearances, and deaths of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of health care workers. What does "apolitical" mean in that context? Should not the actions of well-intentioned U.S. groups be based on principled stands rather than on fear of politically charged situations? We should note that the Salvadoran physicians, surely recognizing the political and life-threatening implications, did speak out against the government abuses of medical neutrality. Do the professional health groups in this country have that courage?

More and more health care workers from the United States and other countries have spoken out and have helped in a direct way to set up and supply people's health clinics in regions of "popular control"—that is, those controlled (and protected) by the rebels. These clinics give badly needed basic medical and maternal-nutritional care to a populace that was essentially ignored by its own government even before the present hostilities. Widespread vaccination programs have been instituted, for example, even in parts of the capitol city of San Salvador. It should be added that the neutrality of the medical personnel is respected by the rebel forces.

The Reagan Administration's move to send military doctors may be belated recognition of the success of these clinics among the Salvadoran people. However, unlike the popular clinics, but like the millions of our tax dollars that have

gone before, it is a good assumption that the skills of the U.S. government-sponsored physicians will not reach the Salvadoran people who need them most.

The article, and the final ambiguous comments by Thomas Eisner, promote the myth of two extremes, in which there is no effective action for professional organizations that want to remain apolitical and not "antagonize" the Salvadoran government (the very one responsible for the lack of health care and malnutrition) by identifying with activist political groups in the United States. If the organizations would act on humane principles in this matter, they would, like the Salvadoran physicians, find it obligatory to take a political position and thus be subject to the reactions of their government—the Reagan Administration. These reactions will be temporary, however, while the sense of justice, good will, and honesty that are attributes of our people are permanent.

JOSEPH LAYON

*Department of Anesthesia,  
University of Florida College  
of Medicine, Gainesville 32601*

MICHAEL A. COLLINS

*Department of Biochemistry,  
Loyola University of Chicago,  
Maywood, Illinois 60153*

## Politics and Science

For a long period of time I have been concerned by various protests and pleas for more or less distinguished scientists in the U.S.S.R. that have been undertaken in the name of our association. As a member I ask that the AAAS's policy about protests and pleas with political character be reviewed. In reality, a professional association of scientists serving the progress of science includes members with various political opinions; therefore, it should avoid becoming involved in politics as long as government action does not directly concern science and its development.

While as a humanist I am deeply concerned by the fate of all fellow human beings in prison in any country, the AAAS cannot and should not intervene on these individuals' behalf if there are not what we can call Galileo-like circumstances, that is, situations in which scientists are punished because of their research (and not because of their political opinion or other activities unrelated to their profession).

G. ANKERL

*CH-1211, Geneva-11 (Stand),  
Switzerland*