

Evan Lyon, MD, is an associate physician with the Division of Social Medicine and Health Inequalities at Brigham and Women's Hospital and a clinician with Partners In Health.

Vivek Maru, JD, is the co-founder and co-director of Timap for Justice, an experimental legal aid program in Sierra Leone. He now works with the Justice Reform Group at the World Bank.

Please address correspondence to the authors c/o Evan Lyon, email: elyon@partners.org.

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HEALTH AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN PRACTICE: FROM THE EDITORS

Health and Human Rights is especially concerned, as Paul Farmer states in his introductory essay on “challenging orthodoxies,” with “human rights in the doing.” The “Practice” section of this journal is dedicated to the voices and experience of the doers, that is, to the grit and the grain of practical efforts to advance social and economic rights.

In the United States, at the end of the Civil War in 1865, the government legally granted black people all the freedoms of citizens. But after a hopeful, ephemeral period of reconstruction, African-Americans were denied many of these rights; life after emancipation was defined by racism, violence, poverty, and the apartheid of Jim Crow. Nearly a hundred years later, a movement for genuine freedom gathered and rose into a resounding force. Black people and their allies organized themselves for nonviolent protest, community development, and strategic legal action. In the face of this massive mobilization, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the federal government and the judiciary began to enforce rights that had until then been nominal.

The aspirations of that movement did not stop at civil and political equality. In 1967, addressing Riverside Church, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. articulated a broader vision for social justice:

We as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a “thing-oriented” society to a “person-oriented” society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered. . . . A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. . . . There is nothing to keep us from molding a recalcitrant status quo with bruised hands until we have fashioned it into a brotherhood.

The next year, Dr. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference organized the Poor People's Campaign. A multi-racial coalition of activists joined the campaign to push for an “economic bill of rights,” which was never realized. Today, forty years after Martin Luther King's murder, it is worth remembering that when he died in Memphis, he was in Tennessee not to lend his voice to a struggle against racism or the denial of civil rights, but to a protest of unionized sanitation workers for better pay and working conditions.

The same brave spirit that gave people the strength to endure church bombings, dogs, and fire hoses in pursuit of freedom in the American South continues to animate a global movement for economic and social rights, including the right to health. For some, the right to health is an uncontroversial principle. But attaining this foundational human right remains elusive for many, including the vast majority of the world's poor.

FROM THE EDITORS

We live in an agonizing lag time between the declaration of the right to health and its realization.

The “Health and Human Rights in Practice” section is for those who are working to fashion, in Dr. King’s words, a brotherhood out of a recalcitrant status quo. We welcome contributions from practitioners of all kinds — from grassroots activists and community organizers to legislators and ministers; from primary health workers to doctors, lawyers, and administrators. We seek the insight and reflection that emerges from practical endeavor. We are flexible about the form and style of the pieces that will appear here, but we hope that each one will be of genuine relevance to those engaged in kindred work.

The open access character of the journal will allow our conversation to reach across boundaries and across levels of engagement. We particularly encourage writing — and photos, video, stories, songs; anything that can be shared via the internet — from individuals and organizations who have not yet had the chance to participate in the global discourse around human rights. We will do everything possible to accommodate submissions in the original languages of your work. Our only standards will be solid grounding in human rights practice, rigor in analysis, vigor in engagement, and a spirit of solidarity.

Evan Lyon
Vivek Maru