Global Health, Humanitarian Medical Aid, and the Ethics of Rationing

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Abstract : In our globalized world we need to appreciate the fact that questions of health and justice need to be addressed on a global scale, too. The way in which diverse governmental and non-governmental initiatives are trying to answer the need for humanitarian medical aid has long since been a visible result of globalized responsibility. While the intention of humanitarian medical aids seems to be evident, the allocation of resources has become more and more an ethical and societal challenge. With a rising number and growing dimension of humanitarian catastrophes around the globe the search for ethically justifiable ways to decide who might benefit from limited resources has become a pressing question. Rooted in theories of justice (Rawls) and concepts of social welfare (Sen) we developed and implemented a model for an ethically sound distribution of a limited annual budget for humanitarian care in one of the largest medical universities of Germany. Based on our long lasting experience with civil casualties of war (Afghanistan) and civil war (Libya) as well as with under- and uninsured and/or stateless patients we are now facing the on-going refugee crisis as our most recent challenge in terms of global health and justice. Against this background, the paper strives to a) explain key issues of humanitarian medical aid in the 21st century, b) explore the problem of rationing from an ethical point of view, c) suggest a tool for the rational allocation of scarce resources in humanitarian medical aid, d) present actual cases of humanitarian care that have been managed with our toolbox, and e) discuss the international applicability of our model beyond local contexts.