

War is a health hazard

by Dr Jenny Grounds



2 MAPW War & Militarism series

- War destroys the physical, mental, and social health of individuals and communities. It also destroys the environment
- War wastes valuable resources that could be better used to address urgent global health needs.
- Peacemaking and diplomacy are less costly and more effective at resolving conflict than war-making.

The human costs of war are enormous. There are many deaths, physical injuries are numerous and varied, while the mental injuries are more complex than the term 'post-traumatic-stress-disorder' could ever encompass.

War is destructive

The [National Commission for the Commemoration of the Anzac Centenary claims](#)¹, "The Anzac tradition has undeniably shaped the development of Australia since the First World War." Speaking of the creative legacy of Australia's involvement in WWI, particularly Gallipoli, the Commission says its commemoration program will give "every Australian an opportunity to... learn about the men and women whose service was instrumental in creating the Australia we know and enjoy today."

War is not a creative process. Rather, it is fundamentally destructive. (See table.)

"War is not a creative process."

Most Australians would agree we need a military presence to defend our nation. Most would also agree that the people of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) are committed to Australia's defence and have an extremely dangerous job. It is possible to respect the commitment and courage of the ADF while also questioning Australia's involvement in particular wars.

Australia has been continuously at war for over a decade. It is important to examine the real costs of war that Australians, and those people in whose lands we fight, are being asked to bear.

War devastates health

- **Death and major traumatic injury** of soldiers and civilians from gunshots, grenades, rockets and aerial bombings. Permanent disability and poverty, depression and despair often follow.
- **Psychological trauma** on large scale, including rape and violence toward women and children, or exposure to such acts. Serving military personnel can also suffer psychological harm with enduring effects. Even in countries with high quality health services, the cost of caring for traumatised people remains high for years after their involvement in war.

First World War: One of the deadliest conflicts in human history

(figures approximate, accurate records not available)

Total military personnel involved: 70 million, almost half were killed, wounded or captured

Military deaths: 10+ million

Military wounded: 20+ million

Civilians: Uncounted millions suffered illness and death (approx 1.5 million deaths in Armenian genocide, 12 million from flu)

Australians: 324,000 served overseas, over 60,000 killed plus 156,000 wounded (including those gassed) and 4,000 captured. 50,000 served on Gallipoli, total **casualties** 28,150, inc 8,709 deaths.

Source: Dr Peter Stanley

Other health impacts: civilians – famine, influenza pandemic following war; military – 'shellshock', **sexually transmitted diseases**, **self-inflicted wounds**, **trench warfare** also caused various infections including nephritis, dysentery, gangrene, 'trench foot', and diseases from lice, rats, severe cold.





- **Unexploded weapons** like [landmines and cluster bombs](#) kill and injure civilians for decades after a war. They cause poverty by preventing families from returning home or farming their land.
- **Health impact of environmental destruction.** Farming disrupted because land degraded, soil compacted and craters left by bombing. Agent Orange, sprayed widely in Vietnam four decades ago to kill forests, increased birth deformity rates in Vietnamese children. Deliberate targeting of chemical and other industrial facilities causes dangerous contamination, eg [1999 NATO bombings in Yugoslavia](#).
- **Destruction (often deliberate) of basic human services** such as hospitals, food and clean water supplies, eg. [Sri Lankan hospitals attacked](#) in recent civil war; [US targeting Iraq's water supply](#).
- **People fleeing conflict.** Globally there are [over 40 million people](#) displaced from their homes due to conflict. These people are vulnerable to deprivation, exposure and exploitation.
- **Poverty.** War undermines funding for health and education. Military budgets in many countries remain grossly excessive while millions of people die for lack of food, water, shelter and basic health care.

Negotiating peace is cheaper and more effective than waging war

A [2006 study by RAND Corporation](#)² found that UN peace-building operations had a two-thirds success rate and were surprisingly cost-effective. The UN spent less money running 17 peace operations around the world for an entire year than the US spent in Iraq in a single month. Sadly, the [same report](#) says, "Of the many lessons about health and nation-building that the international community learned during the 1990s, few have been applied in Afghanistan or Iraq." (p31)

A [2009 report from Australia's Lowy Institute](#)³ also concluded that diplomacy is the most effective way to influence the behaviour of other nations. "Australia's network of overseas diplomatic missions –

the government's most important point of immediate contact with the world, and the best way it has of influencing it – is overstretched and hollowed out. It has not kept pace with our interests..." (p 8)

In the last [Defence White Paper \(2009\)](#), the Australian government said it will increase military spending every year until 2030, despite admitting Australia is "a secure country... with an absence of any serious, enduring disputes with our neighbours that could provide a motive for an attack."

"Australia could better promote global security by increasing overseas aid"

Meanwhile, the government is reducing the amount it spends on diplomacy and international aid. Australia could better promote global security by increasing overseas aid, even with a comparatively small reallocation from our military budget.

Where to from here?

In 2000 the UN set out the [Millennium Development Goals \(MDGs\)](#). These eight broad goals cover education, food supply, disease prevention, maternal health, and environmental sustainability. Achieving these goals would not only improve quality of life but would also help improve global security by reducing the likelihood of conflict. In its 2007 yearbook, the [Stockholm International Peace Research Institute](#) estimated that achieving the MDGs would cost US\$135 billion – a small fraction of the world's global military expenditure for just one year.

References and further reading

The online version of this paper contains links to additional references.

¹How Australia may commemorate the Anzac Centenary (2011). www.anzaccenentary.gov.au

²Securing Health: Lessons from Nation-Building Missions (2006) RAND Center for Domestic and International Health Security. www.rand.org/pubs/monographs

³Australia's Diplomatic Deficit (2009) Lowy Institute for International Policy www.lowyinstitute.org

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