



## 29. The health of migrant workers

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### Background

The double suicide bombing in the Neveh Sha'anani pedestrian mall in South Tel Aviv in January 2003 forced us, the physicians, to observe a new reality in all its ugliness. In this horrific terrorist attack, 23 people were killed and more than a hundred others were injured. The dead and wounded included both Israelis and foreign workers who lived and worked in the neighborhood. While the rescue services rushed to take the Israelis to hospitals, the foreign workers, although wounded and bleeding, preferred to hide in a safe corner out of fear of the police.

The fear of being arrested and deported from the country as part of the mass deportation policy overcame even the need for urgent medical treatment. Even the generous declaration of the then Minister of the Interior, Eli Yishai, that persons injured in the terrorist attack and their families would be granted temporary residence permits, did not ease the fears of this community.

Many of the foreign workers even avoided coming to hospitals to visit their hospitalized friends because of the fear of deportation. This was a new and ugly peak in the inequality of accessibility to and exploitation of means of health and medicine in Israeli society.

About a month after this event the Ethics Board held a debate regarding the status of work immigrants in Israel. The members of the Ethics Board felt that they should voice a decisive opinion about the basic human rights of those lying at the bottom of the social ladder in Israel. Also participating in the debate were representatives of organizations that aid foreign workers – "Worker's hotline" and "Physicians for Human Rights". At the end of the discussion the members of the Ethics Board adopted the following position paper.

### Position paper

- Emigration for the purpose of work is a universal phenomenon that cannot be solved by administrative means only.
- The presence in Israel of hundreds of thousands of work immigrants obligates the institutions of the State to address the basic human rights of these workers, including their welfare, health, and medical condition.
- The state of health of work immigrants has a direct influence on the health of the entire population. Consequently, a dual obligation is imposed on the authorities to ensure the health of these immigrants.



- Proper living and working conditions must be set and enforced in order to prevent exploitation and illness of the work immigrants.
- A proper legal framework must be created to give the immigrants free access to health services while collecting from them health tax.
- Every physician has the ethical obligation to give urgent medical treatment even to work immigrants who have no health insurance.
- Non-urgent medical treatment for work immigrants shall be given at the physician's discretion, even if not covered by the State Health Insurance Law.
- As part of the maintenance of medical confidentiality, the identity of work immigrants requesting medical treatment shall be concealed.
- The Ethics Board calls on physicians who are members of the Israeli Medical Association to volunteer and contribute from their professional experience for the good of work immigrants in Israel.