

THE INVISIBLE HANDCUFFS

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Everyone looks up to someone for inspiration. Whether it is a superhero or a unique person, the inspiring individual always leaves a positive print on our lives. As we grow, we realize that heroes do not always wear capes; sometimes they just wear scrubs and a white coat. Our vision of an inspiring superhero evolves to form an image of a compassionate person saving lives. This hero, a more realistic one compared to the rest, is called a "doctor". With the use of a scalpel or a stethoscope, magic can be witnessed with the blink of an eye. These heroes, along with other dedicated healthcare professionals including nurses and allied carers, are serving the community on daily basis despite any difficulties they may face.

Patients across the globe visit hospitals to see a doctor in their white coat. To them, the white coat is not only part of the doctor's "medical outfit", it represents professionalism and integrity. It acts as a sign of commitment to care for the ill. Unfortunately, what patients fail to see are the invisible handcuffs that come along with wearing the white coat. It is 2020 and doctors worldwide are standing strong fighting at the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic. With the use of their firm fists, their magic tools are manipulated in a steady and an incredible fashion to provide the care needed for those who are suffering. These heroes tend to forget all about their handcuffs and work tirelessly to focus all their attention on their patients.

A person wearing a white lab coat and a surgical mask is sitting on a bench. They are looking down with a distressed expression, their hands clasped in their lap. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

Not every doctor is handcuffed; however, those in training - both medical and surgical- are sometimes handcuffed and exploited. The case does not apply everywhere, but some countries, such as Jordan, to this day are not paying the majority of their trainee doctors - the same doctors who are taking care of patients in wards, emergency rooms, operating theatres, and clinics. Yes! The invisible handcuffs are restraining the same doctor you first see at your hospital visit.

Training of doctors combines a huge array of tasks aimed at saving their patients, burdensome shifts, and endless paperwork. To no surprise, trainees also have to bear the legal responsibility in case of a medical or surgical error! As they finish their job at the hospital, they walk into their homes only to face different kind of responsibilities; one of those is a financial one. They spend money on their basic necessities such as food, books, rent and bills. Needless to say, it is money that did not come as compensation of their work at the hospital. So, where does this money come from?

Many trainee doctors are left with the same question, how should they meet their financial commitments while abiding with the rules of this unfair game that takes years to be over! Long and sometimes unpredictable working hours, as well as theoretical books that need to be studied leave them with few other options to earn an income. The differences between the doctors' backgrounds play an important role in determining who should train and who should not. Doctors with a wealthier background tend to face fewer issues with joining an unpaid training program since finding a source of income for the years of training may not be a necessity.

Modern day slavery is hitting trainee doctors hard. Unpaid training positions are a form of forced labour. Hospitals are profiting from the trainee doctors' work, while the doctors themselves are not paid for it. Laws to prevent unpaid work experience must be enforced without any gray areas allowing hospitals to take advantage of the doctors' need to train.

The burden of this healthcare crisis has fallen extremely hard on the trainees who are fighting at the frontlines of this pandemic, risking their lives to save the lives of others. Many were forced to move out of their house away from their families to avoid the spread of the virus as they are continuously at risk of getting infected due to exposure. Whether it is the extra personal protective equipment, the lockdown measures taken, or their new accommodations, the trainees are facing a new financial issue due to the increased expenses resulting from the crisis.

Despite the difficult circumstances caused by the pandemic, the trainees have continued to do their job in an impressive way full of courage and bravery. We raise our hats to every trainee working hard in the emergency room, operating theatre, and across the wards of the hospitals! Such selfless acts deserve an award to highlight the importance of the white coat teams in our lives! Let this pandemic trigger an outcry to end unpaid training programs, and pave the way to formulate and tighten laws that protect trainee doctors to end exploitation, forced labour, and modern slavery within the healthcare system. To all trainees across the world, we salute you!



About Muna

Muna Rommaneh is an intern doctor from Jordan. She is a proactive global health and surgery activist; serving daily as the voice of those suffering from health conditions or lacking access to healthcare services. She is a human rights and youth advocate, empowering vulnerable groups and those who are striving to bring a change in their communities.

