Assembly kit
The red cross emblem

For a quick assembly, all you need to do is photocopy the performance script, decide who is going to play each of the roles – young people or teachers or a combination – then have a read through or rehearsal.

If you have time, you can enhance the performance by including some of the add-ons. The follow-up activities offer a range of simple activities suitable for exploring the issues in more depth in class after the assembly.

Age group

The assembly kit has been written for 11–16-year-olds, but it can also be used with younger and older children.

Learning outcomes

> Students will gain an understanding of the significance of the red cross emblem, particularly in conflict situations
> Students will learn about neutrality and impartiality in humanitarian work
> Students will gain an initial understanding of aspects of international humanitarian law, or the laws of war.
Performance

The assembly performance is a script that can be presented by a group of students, by two or three teachers or by a combination of students and teachers. You’ll need to cast a narrator, a reporter and either one person, two people or a group to take the part of the chorus. See notes in the add-ons section below.

There is an accompanying powerpoint slide show which you can project during the performance – you’ll see prompts in the script which tell you when to change slides.

Narrator
Imagine getting hold of a large sheet of white paper or white cloth. Imagine painting a large red cross in the centre of it. Then imagine displaying it where everyone could see it. That could be illegal. The chances are that you would be breaking the law.

Chorus
Breaking the law? For displaying a red cross? Are you sure?

Narrator
Quite sure. There’s a lawyer in London who writes to people who display the red cross without being authorised to. Each year he writes to organisations or individuals who display the red cross emblem or designs that look like it on vehicles, buildings, clothing or websites. He is very polite, and explains the reasons. But he is very firm too. If necessary, people could be taken to court to prevent the red cross emblem from being misused.

Chorus
But why? It is only a red cross.

Narrator
Yes, but it is there to protect people and to reduce suffering. If you misuse it you could put many lives at risk.

To understand this, we sent a news reporter back in time to northern France to see what was going on in the terrible battles of the First World War...

> Slide one

Reporter
Here I am at one of the field hospitals set up just a few kilometres from the front line where the troops have been engaged in some of the bitterest fighting of this terrible war. All day wounded soldiers have been arriving. Some walking with difficulty, helped by comrades, others on stretchers, some in ambulances.

The hospital, the ambulances, and many of the volunteer first aid workers and medical personnel are all marked with a large red cross on a white background. That shows that they must not be attacked – it means ‘don’t shoot’.

Narrator
That red cross emblem is a very important symbol. It is a sign that help is available. It also marks people as neutral, as non-fighters. If you are wearing that red cross, or working in a building or vehicle displaying the red cross emblem, it shows you are a military medic or a Red Cross volunteer – in other words, you’re not taking any part in the fighting. You are only there for humanitarian reasons – to help reduce the suffering of the ill or injured.
> Slide two
Reporter
Red Cross workers do not just give medical aid. I have now travelled in time to the Second World War. I see the work the Red Cross does in visiting prisoners, in providing basic supplies, and in taking messages to and from prisoners of war and their families. The emblem is respected. Soldiers on all sides know that they must not shoot or attack objects or people using it. They also know that they will not be under threat from anyone associated with the red cross emblem.

> Slide three
Narrator
We also see the red cross emblem in operation today – or sometimes the red crescent or the new emblem of the red crystal. All three emblems mean the same thing. You have perhaps seen television pictures of Red Cross workers pulling injured people from damaged buildings. You may have seen it in refugee camps after a disaster, or in aid convoys, on ships, planes or helicopters bringing medical or relief supplies.

Chorus
We have seen them. But what do they have to do with us displaying a red cross on a white sheet?

Narrator
You have to realise that the life-saving meaning of the emblem in conflicts does not just happen. It does not come out of nowhere. It has to be built up and understood by everyone. That takes time. So during peacetime, we must all learn to recognise and respect the red cross, red crescent and red crystal emblems.

> Slide four
If they appeared on first aid kits, in shop fronts, on poster adverts, in films, on clothes, in magazines, on buses, as body decorations, on books, in television ads, in supermarkets and all the other places that we see images, then their meaning would be blurred.

Chorus
So we might not be sure whether the red cross was the real red cross, or just an advert for a chemist?

Narrator
That's correct, and that is why there are very precise rules. Only those genuinely entitled to use the red cross may do so – and even they have to operate within strict guidelines. It's mainly used by the military medical services, but relief organisations like the British Red Cross can also use it next to their name.

Chorus
Are the emblems ever misused? Are they ever ignored?

> Slide five
Narrator
In general, there is great respect for the red cross and the red crescent emblems. They are widely recognised as symbols of protection and assistance for victims of armed conflicts and natural disasters. Sadly there are times when the system breaks down, and the emblems have come under attack. Over to our reporter...

Reporter
In December 2011, a food centre run by the Somali Red Crescent in the Somali town of Bardera was hit by an air strike. In Sri Lanka a hospital was shelled, killing and injuring patients. In Libya and Lebanon, ambulances have been shot at. In Afghanistan, the wounded have been stuck for hours in vehicles held up in checkpoint queues. The Iraq war saw deliberate attacks on humanitarian aid workers, with at least five Red Cross staff killed.
> Slide six

Narrator

It is not only in warfare that the protection of the red cross or crescent is sometimes ignored. During a demonstration, an ambulance, which should be protected, was filled with tear gas after canisters were shot into it.

Chorus

So would the Red Cross people need to have soldiers with them for protection?

Narrator

No. The humanitarian work of the Red Cross is based on strict neutrality and independence. If it accepted protection from one side in a conflict it would lose its neutrality. Sadly it has sometimes had to stop work in certain places due to fears about the safety of personnel.

We can see from all this that combatants – people doing the fighting – must never display a red cross, a red crescent or a red crystal emblem. For example, you can’t use an ambulance marked with a red cross to carry soldiers or military equipment. Doing that is called a grave misuse of the emblem – and is itself a war crime.

Chorus

What can we do to help?

> Slide seven

Narrator

Learn to recognise the shape of the red cross. See how it is different from, for example, the cross of St George. Spot the red crescent too and the new emblem, the red crystal, that was agreed in 2005.

We could all learn more about what it means, and how it is used around the world.

If we see a misuse, we can report it to the British Red Cross UK Office in London or to a local Red Cross branch.

End of performance

Notes for teachers

Under the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their additional protocols, the emblems are recognised as symbols of neutrality and protection. The principal users of the emblem are the medical services of the armed forces of each country. Each government can then permit the use of the emblem by its National Society. In the UK, the British government has chosen the red cross emblem, and has authorised the British National Society to display the red cross within strict parameters.

The red cross is often wrongly perceived as a general symbol of first aid or the medical profession, but it can only be used by military medical services or by the authorised National Society to indicate neutral and impartial assistance.

None of the emblems are intended to have any religious significance. The red cross emblem is simply a reversal of the Swiss flag. The founder of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, Henry Dunant, was Swiss.
Add-ons

Discussion add-on

To help students prepare to perform the assembly, use the photos in the slide show to introduce the topic and stimulate discussion.

You could divide the class into small groups and give them a photo each. Get each group to present and describe the image to the rest of the class.

Together, discuss the common theme of the images. Think about these points:

> What do the photos have in common?
> What do they think the assembly will be about?
> What does the red cross emblem mean to them?
> What do they associate it with?

To round off the discussion, look at the captions for each photo, before moving on to prepare for the assembly.

Chorus add-on

The part of the ‘chorus’ in the performance presents the questions and thoughts that a young person, or indeed any adult, might have.

To add a dramatic element to the assembly, think about casting two or three students in this role to create a chorus of voices. The group will have to practise their lines to make sure they can deliver them clearly and in unison.

Think about where your group will position themselves on the stage – sitting to one side forming a mini-audience, or standing in a cluster so that they can all be seen.
Follow-up activities

Poster follow-up

Now that students have an understanding of the meaning of the three emblems, see if they can communicate that to others. Ask them to design a poster that raises awareness of the emblems.

Board blast what the emblem means from what students remember from the assembly. You could print out the script or read excerpts to jog their memory if necessary.

Think about what the emblem is communicating to different groups of people – for example, someone injured in an earthquake, a soldier in a war. Think again about why it is illegal to use the emblem for other purposes. Was there any difference between the three emblems?

Talk about the fact that none of the emblems has any religious significance. In fact, the red cross is simply a reversal of the Swiss flag. The founder of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, Henry Dunant, was Swiss. Why is it important for the emblem to be religiously and politically neutral?

Talk about what makes a good poster. Can students think of clever, eye-catching posters whose message has stayed with them? Was it the picture or the words that worked so well? What principles can be drawn from these posters to use on their own posters?

Writing follow-up

Ask students to imagine they are the London lawyer whose job it is to write to people who misuse the emblem. Tell them they’ve seen a vet’s surgery using the red cross emblem as its logo – outside the surgery and for advertising. They need to compose a letter to the vet, explaining why this use isn’t allowed.

Before they begin, discuss the tone they might use in the letter. Remember the vet might have spent money on advertising and signs so will need to be persuaded. Would they use an informal tone, a forceful tone, a polite tone?

What would help the vet to understand the problem of misusing the emblem? What did students learn in the assembly that helped them to understand why it’s important not to use the emblem incorrectly? Think about what the vet already knows about the red cross emblem and what will be new information. Make notes on the key points to make in the letter before writing it.

Emblem-spotting follow-up

Ask students to keep an eye out for the three emblems – red cross, red crescent and red crystal. Encourage them to make a note of where they see it, take a photo if they can, keep a newspaper cutting or print out the image from a website. Ask them to be vigilant for misuses.

Each student can bring in their most surprising example – it could be a possible misuse or a particularly dramatic image.

As a group, look at the examples and discuss which are misuses of the emblem. If you find any, or if there are uses you aren’t sure about, email the education team at education@redcross.org.uk or write to the address below.
Speaker follow-up

Consider inviting an expert to talk to your group about the emblem. Request a school speaker from your local Red Cross branch: redcross.org.uk/schoolspeakers

You might also approach a member of your local community who has a connection with the red cross and red crescent emblems. What does the emblem mean to them? Ideas include:

> A current or ex-member of the military services
> A refugee from a conflict who was helped by the Red Cross
> A user of a local Red Cross service, such as care in the home

This assembly kit is part of the humanitarian education programme produced by the British Red Cross. Teachers and other educators are free to use it, copy it and circulate it for their work. Please always include this notice and the contact details below. This assembly kit was researched and written by P. J. White and produced in August 2006 and revised in May 2012.

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