

INTERNATIONAL

TORTURE, from page 8

Breaches of medical guidelines during conflict are not a recent phenomena. "This is a pervasive problem," Dr. Nicholl says. "There have been similar issues in pretty much every similar conflict, e.g. Doctors in the Holocaust camps in Nazi Germany, the role of psychiatrists in Russian gulags, the doctors in apartheid South Africa who covered up deaths in custody to more recent allegations of Israeli doctors' role in interrogations. The latter has led to a call for Dr. Yoram Blachar, the head of the Israel Medical Association, to

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— DR. DAVID NICHOLL
 BRITISH NEUROLOGIST,
 LEADING OPPONENT AGAINST PHYSICIANS IN TORTURE.

stand down as President of the World Medical Association (the body that sets many of the ethical rules), from over 700 physicians including myself." The ability of physicians to heal and hide makes them a coveted asset to individuals with torturous agendas. Dr. Steven Miles, author of "An Oath Betrayed: America's Torture Doctors" and medical ethics expert, highlights that medical professionals are uniquely placed to conceal torture and as such they come under increased pressure to participate while facing limited repercussions.

"The medical profession is essential to the modern practice of torture," Miles says. "Globally, about half of torture survivors report that a physician supervised their torture. Today torture regimes need physicians to design methods to minimize scars and to conceal the causes of death of those who die. Sanctions against physicians for complicity with torture are rare and the medical associations are only recently getting involved."

Dr. Miles is currently leading an international study exploring the punishment of physicians who have assisted torture with the results expected later in the year. Previous research and first-hand interviews with former prisoners has led Dr. Miles to conclude that physicians have remained silent while prisoners were tortured by American servicemen. Medical staff also provided information that enabled interrogators to determine how far victims could be physically abused while others denied prisoners prosthetic limbs and antibiotics for festering wounds.

As with Guantánamo, the problem victims, investigators and human rights organizations face is establishing the scale of the problem and finding solid evidence. Physicians for Human Rights (PHR), a non-profit organization which promotes the right to health for all, has been fighting to expose these practices since the allegations of torture at Abu Ghraib Prison in Iraq and at Guantánamo Bay became public.

The "U.S. Health Professionals' Call to Prevent Torture and Abuse of Detainees in U.S. Custody", which has been signed by more than 1200 physicians, psychologists, and others nationwide, reaffirmed the health profession's commitment against abusive interrogation methods and called for full and transparent investigations of abusive interrogation practices. The Obama administration has taken steps toward greater transparency, but more action is needed if the individuals responsible for violating human rights are to be held accountable and a new precedent set.

Perhaps the most high profile case in which British doctors were directly involved in the abuse of a prisoner is that of Baha Mousa. Mousa died on Sept 13, 2003 in Basra while under the custody of British forces. Dr. Nicholl highlights that the incident was full of irregularities: "Mousa's death certificate cited 'Cardiorespiratory arrest-asphyxia' as the reason for his death. There was no mention of the clear signs of trauma as the result of the severe beating he sustained whilst under the custody of UK troops. One has to question as to why the pathologist avoided noting these findings."

The Secretary of State for Defense has branded this event a disturbing incident, "Not just because a man died in the custody of British soldiers but because an investigation by the Royal Military Police and a subsequent Court Martial highlighted further important questions that needed to be answered." The inquiry was established under the Inquiries Act 2005 and is chaired by the Right Honourable Sir William Gage, a retired Court of Appeals judge.

Madni's case is representative of the gross violations of human rights that have become all too common in the War on Terror. Yet his allegations regarding the conduct of physicians expose a worrying erosion of medical morals in the post-9/11 world. It appears that a number of medical professionals have remained complicit, some have colluded and a significant minority have directly participated in torturous acts. "A proper investigation of this involvement needs to be undertaken and doctors struck off medical registers," concludes Chloe Davies. "Where appropriate, such individuals should be prosecuted for their involvement in torture."

This article was written by Franck Martin following an internship with Reprieve, a legal human rights charity which represents individuals held in secret prisons and on Death Row across the world. Street News Service Exclusive © Street News Service: www.street-papers.org



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