

Physicians for Human Rights

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

<https://phr.org/our-work/resources/prohibiting-medical-participation-in-torture/>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Megan Gibson on June 14, 2012

Eighteen years after the United States ratified the [Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment](#), we are still engaging in illegal and immoral practices all over the world. Thus the need to raise awareness about torture and to take a public stand against it continues.

This month, June, is recognized by the global human rights community as [Torture Awareness Month](#), with June 26 marking International Day in Support of Victims of Torture. At PHR, there is a special need to acknowledge the complicity of health care professionals in the torture of those under their care.

Unbeknownst to many even those in the health care profession doctors and psychologists played a crucial role in the system of torture and abusive treatment of detainees in locations such as Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib, and other sites.

Numerous declassified government reports, including those by the United States Senate Armed Services Committee and the Inspector General for the CIA, however, have confirmed this well-kept secret.

[PHR reports](#) have also revealed doctors and psychologists involvement in excessive isolation, forced nudity, stress positions, sleep deprivation, temperature manipulation, confinement, and waterboarding. These are techniques that were designed, proffered, supervised, and recorded by licensed health care providers with the intention of destroying the physical and mental senses of detainees.

Many would believe that the systematic use of torture and enhanced interrogation techniques that heavily reigned during the previous Administration are in the past, but the reality is that those dark days are not far behind us, and they will be in our future if no one speaks out or acts against such policies.

Fortunately, a ray of hope for the prevention of such illegal and unethical methods, and for the accountability of any of those involved, has been emerging within the US.

This year, state legislatures of Massachusetts and New York have an unprecedented opportunity to take a stand against health professionals involvement in torture.

Both states have pending bills which would prohibit state-licensed health care professionals from participating in unethical conduct by ensuring that they face professional sanctions if they engage in torture or abuse of detainees, or directly participate in the interrogation of individuals.

Furthermore, the bills would protect NY and MA-licensed healthcare professionals who resist unlawful orders to harm those in their care, and empower those professionals to safely report such orders after the fact.

In short, individuals who report torture, healthcare professionals who do not want to engage in torture, and those caught between their oath and the orders they receive from their employers, would all be protected under the bill.

Former Guantanamo detainee Fouad al-Rabia now home in Kuwait with his four children after being found innocent by a federal court was repeatedly denied medication by doctors until he cooperated with his interrogators.

Fawzi Al Odah was strapped into a six-point restraint chair and force-fed though tubes too large for his nostrils by doctors, against his express wishes.

With laws enacted from bills such as those pending in NY and MA, the doctors who treated Fouad and Fawzi would not only be barred from participating in such abuse, they would also be required to report it if they witnessed it.

This is an opportunity for states to stand up for the integrity of the healthcare profession as well as fundamental American values. Massachusetts and New York serve as beacons of hope for the survival and advancement of civil and human rights in the US.

These bills should serve as an inspiration to other states to propose similar legislation throughout the country. We as a country must trust in the preservation of one of the most basic principles of medical ethics: do no harm.

Torture Awareness Month is an important time to raise the awareness of our friends, family, and community, and importantly, the awareness of our local and national representatives. We must share the urgent need for an immediate stop to torture, whether under

military regimes or foreign governments or our own democracy.

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