

IN FOCUS

***Stop Torture in Health Care:  
A New Campaign Tackles Abuse in Medical Facilities***  
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Health care settings should be places where human rights are realized. Yet, too often, they are places where human rights are severely abused, sometimes amounting to torture and ill-treatment. Patients from socially marginalized groups -- people living with HIV, people with life-limiting illnesses, sexual and gender minorities, people who use drugs, and people with intellectual disabilities or mental health problems -- are at particular risk of experiencing severe mental or physical suffering instead of quality care. Their contact with health facilities is too often characterized by physical abuse, insults, invasion of privacy, forced medical procedures, or denial of treatment.



**Faces of Torture in Health Care**

Torture in health care is shockingly common, and such egregious and pervasive cruelty is often condoned in the name of medicine, public health, or public order. For example, in so-called “rehabilitation” centers throughout Southeast Asia, people who use drugs are locked away without any access to medical care or legal recourse. These centers are overseen by government authorities, with private business operating the forced labor facilities inside. The centers rely on physical abuse, shackles, solitary confinement, and other indignities to “treat” drug addiction and extract labor from the detainees. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of people quickly return to drug use once they are released.

Across the globe, women continue to be forced or coerced by medical personnel to submit to permanent and irreversible sterilization procedures, sometimes even without their knowledge. Cases of forced and coerced sterilization have been reported in North and South America, Africa, Asia, and Europe. Women who are poor or stigmatized—Roma women, women living with HIV, indigenous women, women with physical or intellectual disabilities, and women who use drugs—are most likely to be deemed “unworthy” of reproduction. Governments turn a blind eye to these practices in their own public hospitals. Perpetrators are seldom held accountable. Victims rarely obtain justice for this violent abuse of their rights.

Torture also happens when health care workers are prevented from helping patients because of ill-conceived government policies or regulations, or because of bureaucratic inertia. All over the

world, governments fail to ensure that their citizens have access to essential pain medications. This results in hundreds of thousands of people with life-limiting illnesses or acute trauma suffering, and often dying, in excruciating and needless pain every year.

### **Filling the Gap**

To tackle this abuse, a coalition of health and human rights organizations has launched the [Campaign to Stop Torture in Health Care](#). Supported by the Open Society Foundations, Campaign partners are engaged in advocacy efforts with authoritative international norm setters, including the World Health Organization and the World Medical Association, to strengthen ethical guidelines for medical practice. The Campaign is also working with members of the UN Committee against Torture to increase government accountability of severe abuses in health care and is supporting litigation of torture in health care cases in domestic and international courts.

At the national level, the Campaign supports community partners in Central Asia, Eastern Europe, and Southern and Eastern Africa to document torture in health care and to develop local advocacy campaigns demanding an end to the violations and seeking redress for victims.

### **Supporting the Campaign**

Grantmakers can play a key role in ensuring health care centers are safe by prioritizing human rights protections in all health-related grantmaking. At the least, grantmakers should make sure that their funding is not being spent on projects that stigmatize or abuse vulnerable populations in any way. In some cases, funders may not be aware that the health programs they support are complicit in actions that further marginalize vulnerable communities.

An increasing number of health and human rights organizations have joined the Campaign to put an end to the abuse of individuals in health settings. The Campaign to Stop Torture in Health Care is committed to a world in which all people are free from torture and abuse as part of their fundamental human rights, but the presence of more NGOs who are willing to make a concerted effort against torture in health care will be a key step going forth. Currently, the Open Society Foundations is the only funder to have joined the Campaign, but as more funders come together, it will help ensure that individuals on the fringes of society will not be denied a right as basic as the right to health.

### **Resources for Funders**

- 1) Visit the Campaign to Stop Torture in Health Care's website for articles, video clips and resources: [www.stoptortureinhealthcare.org](http://www.stoptortureinhealthcare.org)
- 2) Follow the Campaign on Twitter @CareNotTorture
- 3) Watch this video for an overview of what the Campaign is fighting for:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I-DjQtp-4No>  
Read about how new media and technology has been used for the Campaign:  
<http://www.thedigitalnaturalist.com/home/2011/9/6/qa-stop-torture-in-healthcare.html>
- 4) Contact Lydia Guterman, Campaign Coordinator, Open Society Foundations at [lguterman@sorosny.org](mailto:lguterman@sorosny.org)