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What would you think if your health care worker aided torture?

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We all assume that professionals in the medical field will help, not harm, other people. But an Ohio psychologist was alleged to have committed egregious human-rights violations. His accusers claim that he ordered, supervised and participated in the abuse of detainees at the Guantanamo Bay detention center. More than 1,000 pages documented his actions, and survivors spoke out against him.



Mike Miner • Chicago Tribune/MCT,

A lawsuit was filed against the Ohio Board of Psychology asserting that the board was obligated to investigate the complaint. The case was unfortunately dismissed on procedural grounds, and the psychologist is still licensed and caring for patients in Ohio.

Physicians and other health care professionals take an oath that includes the command to “do no harm.” Yet some doctors, psychologists, nurses and physicians’ assistants take part in the torture and cruel treatment of prisoners of war. They determine the threshold for abuse, calibrate pain, and dictate how far torture techniques can be pushed without killing victims. Yet they have been able to avoid prosecution.

A report by Physicians for Human Rights detailed CIA interrogation techniques after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. The report documented that medical personnel were responsible for using waterboarding, forced nudity, sleep deprivation, temperature extremes, stress positions and prolonged isolation on the prisoners.

No U.S. psychologist involved in such abuses has ever been held accountable for the torture of detainees. Psychologists engage in practices as harmful as those of physicians and use their expertise to create stressful interrogations. In fact, mental health care is often withheld to impose further suffering on prisoners.

A psychologist from New York is also alleged to have participated in abusive interrogations at Guantanamo Bay. When he was accused, the New York Office of Professional Discipline evaded accountability by claiming that his actions at Guantanamo did not constitute the practice of psychology and therefore were not governed by New York standards for psychologists.

Torture is a crime in the United States under many different professional, national and international statutes, acts and conventions. However, both state licensing boards and the military refuse to investigate complaints against doctors and psychologists.

Dr. Steven H. Miles, physician at the Center for Bioethics at the University of Minnesota, is an expert on the role of medical professionals involved in torture. He says: “There are countries that, over the years, have condemned medical complicity in torture in principle, but which haven’t really been willing to investigate medical professionals or hold them accountable. That group of countries includes the United States.”

Our system is broken. According to Dr. Miles, as a country we deny that we participate in torture. By ignoring or minimizing its existence, we maintain our moral high ground. But if state licensing boards and the military don’t fulfill their responsibilities, we can’t hold doctors and psychologists accountable for torture and cruelty. We must ask our Legislature and licensing boards to revoke and suspend the licenses of health care professionals who so severely violate their fundamental oath.

California passed a resolution requiring that its state licensing agencies inform clinicians that if they participate in coercive interrogation or torture, they will be subject to both professional and criminal sanctions.

Minnesota legislators will propose an anti-torture bill in the 2014 session. This bill would require that any medical professional licensed in Minnesota who participates in enhanced interrogation or torture will have his or her license revoked.

Public support is essential in passing such legislation. Without it, Americans could be under the routine care of the very same doctors, therapists or other medical professionals who have been complicit in heinous acts. None of us would knowingly accept this.

There are ways to get involved locally in this commitment toward ethical treatment of prisoners. Follow World Without Genocide, a local nonprofit human-rights organization, as it develops support to pass Minnesota's anti-torture bill. Volunteer with or donate to the Center for Victims of Torture, which provides services to more than 40,000 survivors of torture who live in Minnesota today.

Minnesotans don't want doctors to torture, and we don't want our care provided by doctors who torture.

Alison Schmidt is a student at William Mitchell College of Law and a Benjamin Ferencz Fellow at World Without Genocide.

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