

Israeli doctors colluding in torture

... while world's medical ethics chief turns blind eye

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Israel's watchdog body on medical ethics has failed to investigate evidence that doctors working in detention facilities are turning a blind eye to cases of torture, according to Israeli human rights groups.

The Israeli Medical Association (IMA) has ignored repeated requests to examine such evidence, the rights groups say, even though it has been presented with examples of Israeli doctors who have broken their legal and ethical duty towards Palestinians in their care.

The accusations will add fuel to a campaign backed by hundreds of doctors from around the world to force Yoram Blachar, who heads the IMA, to step down from his recent appointment as president of the World Medical Association (WMA).

More than 700 doctors have signed a petition arguing that Dr Blachar has disqualified himself from leadership of the WMA, the profession's governing ethical body, by effectively condoning torture in Israel.

The campaign against Dr Blachar has gained ground rapidly since his appointment as president in November. Critics said his alleged complicity in the use of torture in Israeli detention facilities can be traced to 1995, when he became chairman of the IMA.

Until 1999, when Israel's Supreme Court restricted torture, Israeli doctors routinely supervised the medical treatment of abused detainees, mostly Palestinians from the occupied territories.

During that period Dr Blachar surprised many colleagues by expressing support for Israeli interrogators' use of "moderate physical pressure" in a letter to *The Lancet*, the British medical journal. The phrase covers a wide range of practices from beatings and binding prisoners in painful positions to sleep deprivation. It is regarded by human rights organisations as a euphemism for torture.

Despite the 1999 court ruling, a coalition of 14 Israeli human rights groups known as United Against Torture concluded in its latest annual report in November that Israeli detention facilities are still using torture systematically. Israeli doctors are also being relied on to treat the resulting injuries.

Last week, Physicians for Human Rights and the Public Committee against Torture in Israel published a joint report examining hundreds of arrests in which Palestinians were bound in "distorted and unnatural" ways to inflict "pain and humiliation" amounting to torture.

The report noted instances where prisoners, including a pregnant woman and a dying man, were shackled while doctors carried out emergency procedures in a hospital.

According to the report, the doctors violated the Tokyo Declaration, the key code of medical ethics adopted by the WMA in 1975 that bans the use of cruel, humiliating or inhuman treatment by physicians.

Ishai Menuchin, the head of the Public Committee, said his group had been lobbying strenuously against Israeli doctors' complicity in torture since it issued a report, *Ticking Bombs*, in 2007, arguing that torture was routine in Israel.

The Public Committee highlighted the testimonies of nine Palestinians who had been tortured by interrogators. The report also noted that in most cases Israeli physicians treating detainees "return their patients to additional rounds of torture, and remain silent".

In June last year, Physicians for Human Rights drew the IMA's attention to two cases in which the attending doctor failed to report signs of torture on a Palestinian.

Anat Litvin of Physicians for Human Rights told the IMA: "We believe that doctors are used by torturers as a safety net – take them out of the system and torture will be much more difficult to enact."

The groups stepped up their pressure in February, writing to Avinoam Reches, the chairman of the IMA's ethics committee. They demanded that his association investigate six cases of doctors who failed to report signs of torture.

In one case, a prison doctor, under pressure from interrogators, agreed to retract a written recommendation that a detainee be immediately hospitalised for treatment.

Prof Reches promised to conduct an inquiry. However, last month the two human rights groups criticised him for failing to investigate their claims, accusing him of holding only "amicable and unofficial" conversations over the phone with a few of the doctors concerned.

"We have sent to the IMA many testimonies from victims of torture who were referred to doctors for treatment," Dr Menuchin said. "But the IMA has yet to do anything about it.

"A significant number of doctors in Israel, in detention facilities and public hospitals, know torture is taking place, but choose to avert their gaze."

This month, Defence for Children International issued a report on the torture of Palestinian children, noting that in several of the cases it cited, Israeli doctors had turned a blind eye. A boy of 14 who was beaten repeatedly on a broken arm reported the abuse to a doctor who, he said, replied only: "I had nothing to do with that."

The report stated that the group "has not encountered a single case where an adult in a position of authority, such as a soldier, doctor, judicial officer or prison staff, has intervened on behalf of a child who was mistreated".

Campaigners against Dr Blachar's appointment as the head of the WMA say its Israeli sister association's inaction on torture is unsurprising given its chairman's public stance.

Derek Summerfield of the Institute of Psychiatry at King's College London, said: "The IMA

under Dr Blachar is in collusion with the Israeli state policy of torture. Its role is to put a benign face on the occupation.”

Dr Blachar told the Israeli website Ynet last week that such criticisms were “slanderous”, saying he and the IMA denounced all forms of torture.

The WMA, with nine million members in more than 80 countries, was established in 1947 as a response to the abuses sanctioned by German and Japanese doctors during the Second World War.

In 2007, the WMA’s general assembly called on doctors to document and report all cases of suspected torture.

Jonathan Cook is a writer and journalist based in Nazareth, Israel. His latest books are “Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East” (Pluto Press) and “Disappearing Palestine: Israel’s Experiments in Human Despair” (Zed Books). His website is www.jkcook.net.

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