

Middle East War: U.S. Doctors Approved Torture and Denied Medical Care to Captives

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American doctors in the Middle East routinely approved the torture of captured suspects and denied them critical medications such as insulin, sometimes with lethal consequences, according to a documented report published in the "Utne Reader."

In Dec., 2002, Defense Secy. Donald Rumsfeld issued a directive allowing interrogators to withhold medical care in nonemergency situations so that "men with injuries including gunshot wounds were denied treatment as a way to make them talk," writes author Justine Sharrock. Although the directive was soon revoked, "the practice continued," she said.

Interrogations conducted at the infamous Abu Ghraib correctional facility in Baghdad had to be preapproved by a physician and psychiatrist, and the CIA got like orders for the punishments it inflicted at its sites.

Sharrock quotes medic Andrew Duffy of the 134th medical company of the Iowa National Guard who told her the attitude of Abu Ghraib's medical officers toward prisoners was "screw these guys" and who said he was ridiculed for trying to save one man's life using CPR.

Long after the world-shaking Abu Ghraib photos were published in 2004 and the Pentagon vowed to stop abusing prisoners, "men were still being strapped into restraint chairs and left in the sun for hours or locked in cells too small to lie down in," Sharrock writes. "The medics regularly found prisoners dehydrated, wrists bloody from overtight handcuffs, ankles swollen from forced standing, joints dislocated from stress positions." (Abu Ghraib's former commandant Gen. Janis Karpinski once estimated 90% of the prisoners were innocent.)

In one instance involving detainee No. 173379 who appeared to need an insulin injection, medics were told to inject the man instead with saline solution using a 14-gauge needle more than two millimeters in diameter of the sort that was used as punishment or to discourage prisoners from seeking care, MP's doused him with pepper spray and stuck him in a tiny cell in the scorching heat, Sharrock writes, and he died the next day. Duffy's written complaint to his supervising captain disappeared.

Pentagon top health official doctor William Winkenwerder Jr. in 2005 allowed military physicians to participate in torture and share medical records with interrogators so long as a detainee wasn't officially their patient, Sharrock writes. Winkenwerder, she adds, got an award from the American Medical Assn.(AMA) that year for outstanding contributions "to the betterment of the public health." The AMA has refused to condemn Pentagon and CIA torture practices and made no response when in Feb., 2006, the U.N. Commission on Human

Rights condemned U.S. doctors for having “systematically” participated in detainee abuse. Bioethicist Steven Miles of the University of Minnesota Medical School said the U.N. condemnation should have been “a call to arms” yet “the AMA said nothing.”

Sharrock said none of the AMA’s top officials she contacted would comment on her story. Nor has any State licensing board, which have the authority to suspend licenses, “ever disciplined a doctor for assisting in military torture.

As for the American Psychiatric Assn., in May, 2006, its President Steven Sharfstein noted that psychiatrists “wouldn’t get into trouble” if they heeded military orders over the APA’s advice that members should not directly assist in interrogations, which he added should not be considered “an ethical rule,” Sharrock writes. Her Utne Reader article was first published in Mother Jones magazine.

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