

**April 9, 2009**

EDITORIAL

Medically Assisted Torture

There was a great deal to be troubled by in a report by the International Committee of the Red Cross documenting the kinds of torture and abuse inflicted on terrorism suspects by the Central Intelligence Agency. One disturbing footnote is that medical personnel were deeply involved in facilitating the abuses, which were intended to coerce suspects into providing intelligence.

The report, prepared in 2007 but kept secret until it was published by The New York Review of Books, was based on Red Cross interviews in late 2006 with 14 “high-value detainees,” who include some of the most dangerous terrorists in custody. The prisoners’ complaints gain credibility because they described similar abuses and had been kept in isolation at different locations, with no chance to concoct a common story.

Various prisoners said they had been subjected to waterboarding, forced to stand for days with their arms shackled overhead, confined in small boxes, beaten and kicked, slammed repeatedly into walls, prevented from sleeping, deprived of solid food, forced to remain naked for weeks or months at a stretch, often in frigid cells and immersed in cold water. All were kept in continuous solitary confinement for their C.I.A. detention, ranging from 16 months to more than four years.

Medical personnel seem to have been involved mostly as facilitators rather than torturers or interrogators. In one case, they monitored a detainee’s oxygen saturation with a device attached to his finger so waterboarding could be stopped before the prisoner suffocated. In another case, an amputee forced to stand with his arms shackled overhead had his intact leg checked daily for signs of dangerous swelling. Several detainees said health workers sometimes instructed interrogators to continue, adjust or stop particular methods of abuse.

Such activities violate the ethical codes of major health organizations, both national and international. The Red Cross called it “a gross breach of medical ethics” that in some cases “amounted to participation in torture and/or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.”

None of the health personnel wore identification, but the prisoners inferred that they were physicians or psychologists. They also could have been paramedics, physician’s assistants or other less-trained personnel.

4/9/2009

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The report underscores the need to have a full-scale investigation into these abusive practices and into who precisely participated in them. Only then will we know whether indictments or, in the case of physicians, the loss of medical licenses, are warranted.

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