

Health professionals and torture

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Introduction

Throughout history, human beings have been exposed to atrocities by each other. Unfortunately, health professionals have been involved in and have played a major role during several unethical processes e.g. medical experiments on victims during World War II. Even at the present time health professionals are engaged in the practical application of several kinds of cruel procedures on human beings. The following examples are listed:

- design of the methods of torture e.g. pharmacological torture.
- techniques of torture e.g. electric torture.
- teaching of torturers and the perpetrators.

Health care professionals are often present during the implementation of torture and of judicial corporal punishment eg. flogging and caning. Health professionals decide whether the victim is 'fit for flogging/caning'. In addition, health professionals are often present during mutilations such as amputation of hand or foot. In several countries using the death penalty, health personnel are responsible for the victim being 'fit for execution'.

The presence of health personnel during executions in order to use the organs for transplantation has also been documented. The method of the execution and its timing is varied depending on the organ required. False death certificates have also been documented..

Enforced sterilization of women, prenatal sex determination and enforced abortion in order to 'eliminate' the female babies, female circumcision and mandatory testing for virginity are other examples of violation of human rights using medical participation.

Our responsibilities

Health personnel have a great responsibility in regard to these violations of human rights - and luckily we have many of them who help treat and rehabilitate the victims despite the attendant danger to themselves. There are many examples of health personnel who have been threatened and subjected to reprisals be-

cause of their respect for the principles of human rights.

London Declaration

In closing let me quote the recent London Declaration of Amnesty International for health professionals:

On the occasion of the 21st anniversary of the establishment of the first Amnesty International medical group, this meeting of representatives of the Amnesty International Health Professionals Network, which consists of physicians, nurses, psychologists, dentists, students in the health professions and others with a special commitment to health and human rights throughout the world; believing that health professionals should defend and promote human rights as an inherent part of their activities to promote health and well-being, reaffirms its commitment to the application of health care skills, knowledge and ethics to the defense and promotion of human rights around the world, in particular to:

- free all prisoners of conscience;
- ensure fair and prompt trials for political prisoners;
- abolish the death penalty, torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment;
- end the denial of medical care to prisoners as a form of ill-treatment and extra-judicial executions and 'disappearances';
- calls on all health professionals to apply their clinical skills and professional ethics to the prevention of human rights violations and the defense of human values;
- urges professional associations and societies to undertake systematic activities to defend those under threat of human rights violations and to investigate and act upon all reports of human rights abuses by health professionals;
- invites all health professionals to join with the Network, either as members of Amnesty International or independently, to work to achieve these objectives.