

August 12, 2013

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We are health care professionals, members of human rights organizations, and others deeply concerned about the delays in closing the Guantánamo Bay detention camp and the appalling treatment of the detainees on hunger strike.

The hunger strike has now passed its sixth month and up to 106 detainees have joined, with as many as 46 of them subjected to force-feeding. The President of the American Medical Association (AMA) has written to Defense Secretary Hagel that force-feeding mentally competent adults is a violation of medical ethics. The American Nursing Association (ANA) position statement, consistent with the Code of Ethics for Nurses, asserts that “acceptance or refusal of food and fluids, whether delivered by normal or artificial means must be respected.”

The Guantánamo Command maintains that force-feeding the prisoners is necessary to save lives and that the procedures conform to acceptable practice. We strongly disagree. There is alarming evidence in news reports and in the new *Guantánamo Standard Operating Procedures: Medical Management of Detainees on Hunger Strike (SOP)* that the Guantánamo method is exceptionally brutal. When a detainee resists, he is forcefully extracted from his cell by several soldiers and strapped into a 6-point restraint chair. A mask is placed over his mouth to keep him from biting or spitting at medical personnel. He may stay strapped down for two hours while personnel make sure he does not vomit the liquid feeding. Men weakened by significant weight loss are particularly at risk for serious injury during this regimen.

Recently, a Guantánamo official announced that no soldiers were needed to tackle and shackle any detainees for 24 hours. In other words, detainees have resisted the force-feeding so frequently and intensely that extraction from their cells has been a regular occurrence. The argument that the force-feeding saves lives is ethically and medically untenable. Even Guantánamo authorities acknowledge that the hunger strike is fueled by despair. If the strike is broken by the punitive procedures and the indefinite detention continues, the number of suicides at Guantanamo, already high, is very likely to increase.

Health care professionals, including those in the military, must maintain their licenses in good standing, and to do so they must follow standards of good ethical practice. This is not what is happening during the hunger strike. The new Standard Operating Procedures allow them to stop the force-feeding only when the detainee agrees to eat or drink in a normal way. When faced with an ethical or medical dilemma, it is the duty of health care professionals to consult with expert colleagues independent of the case. However, information is classified at Guantánamo and there is no protocol in place for medical personnel to be able to consult with ethics experts and the state licensing boards that are responsible for defining and protecting practice standards. Guantánamo

doctors, nurses and psychologists are also constrained from securing the support of their professional colleagues if they experience reprisals for registering a complaint or refusing to participate further.

We urge you, Mr. President, to act immediately before more prisoners die. A Federal judge has confirmed that you can order a stop to the force-feeding that she has called “a painful, humiliating and degrading” process. As Commander-in-Chief you can immediately release those who were approved for release years ago and make closing Guantánamo your top priority. Far from showing weakness or endangering national security, these actions would affirm your duty to uphold the US Constitution, strengthen our nation's resolve to protect human rights, and deter the recruitment of violent extremists who view us as a heartless enemy.

Sincerely,

Yosef Brody, PhD
President-Elect, Psychologists for Social Responsibility

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