

Doctors must be held accountable for complying with torture

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Doctors who assist in torture or other forms of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment should face prosecution and licensing punishments, says an editorial on BMJ.com today.

Steven Miles from the Center for Bioethics at the University of Minnesota, says that more doctors are involved in torturing prisoners than in treating torture survivors. But doctors who assist in torture rarely face professional consequences. He argues that the medical profession must not only dissociate itself from torture but actively investigate and sanction offenders.

More than 100 countries condone the use of torture and up to half of torture survivors report that a doctor was present and oversaw the abuse.

Miles points out that while medical societies are quick to condemn doctors participating in torture abroad, they are not so vocal when it comes to what is taking place in their own country.

In addition, while medical societies support ethical codes that ban doctors from assisting in torture, such as the World Medical Association's Declaration of Tokyo, in practice their policy is to do little, and doctors typically remain exempt from punishment, he writes.

Miles believes that national medical councils and licensing agencies should ensure that doctors who comply with torture can be punished for breaching medical ethics. This has happened in some countries after the

torturing regimes have lost power. For example, the Chilean Medical Society expelled six doctors for overseeing torture during Pinochet's rule, and in South Africa two doctors were punished for failing to report or treat Steven Biko for a fatal head injury inflicted by police. But such examples are rare.

Miles calls for all medical societies to state that abetting torture is a punishable breach of professional conduct for which there are no term limits. Such codes would lay the foundation for holding doctors accountable for torture after a torturing regime loses power, he says.

"Governments that practice torture need doctors. The medical accomplices of torture must not rest in the confidence that they can violate civil society and the ethics of medicine with impunity", he concludes.

Source: British Medical Journal

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