

No role for mental health professionals in the practice of torture

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Psychologists and psychiatrists should not be expected to participate in torture as they do not have the expertise to assess individual pain or the long-term effects of interrogation, says an expert in the *British Medical Journal* today.

The authors, Derrick Silove and Susan Rees, from the University of New South Wales in Australia, say some senior members of the US military have argued that a psychologist's presence is necessary to protect the prisoner or detainee from the "severe physical or mental pain or suffering resulting in prolonged mental harm."

They add that several leading scientific journals have also published papers by authors who support the presence of [mental health](#) professionals as protection for detainees.

But the authors believe that there is no established marker to assess "extreme experiences that cause pain or [psychological trauma](#)" and do not believe it is possible for professionals "to make accurate assessments of the level of pain or mental trauma being experienced by the detainee."

They maintain that it can be "notoriously difficult" to assess how much distress a detainee is experiencing. Indeed, there is evidence that "militants who are ideologically prepared may show greater resilience when tortured."

There is extensive research, they argue, that torture causes long-term

[mental health problems](#). However, "we do not yet have the [scientific knowledge](#) to predict with any precision what the psychological outcome will be for an individual."

The authors conclude that having spent years trying to reveal the damaging effects of torture, it would be ironic if health professionals were called upon to use their skills to participate in this practice.

More information: bmj.com/

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