

November 1, 2013

The Honorable Barack Obama  
President of the United States  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama:

We are writing to you as individuals who are or have been leaders in major U.S. health institutions, as well as medical education, ethics, and research, and who are deeply invested in maintaining the principles of ethics and professionalism in American medical practice. We believe that the practice of force-feeding hunger strikers at Guantánamo Bay severely breaches those principles and undermines medical care at the detention center. While a Department of Defense release claims that mass hunger strikes have largely ended at Guantánamo, individual detainees remain on hunger strikes and protocols issued by command continue to authorize force-feeding. We urge you to put the practice to a stop and repeal protocols that authorize it.

As international and domestic standards for physician response to hunger strikes emphasize, the essential role of physicians in such cases is to maintain their doctor-patient relationship with the detainee, meet the patient's medical needs, and counsel the patient. Respect for the patient's decision-making, which is the foundation of trust between doctor and patient, is essential. Moreover, taking this approach can contribute to reducing the tension between prisoners and administrators and – in some cases – aid in the resolution of the underlying dispute. Force-feeding is utterly incompatible with these professional values, which is why the World Medical Association and the American Medical Association condemn its use.

Force-feeding undermines appropriate medical care and ethical responsibilities because physicians act as agents of command, a fundamental violation of professionalism. Detainees' choices are not respected. Worst of all, a command protocol calls for the use of five-point restraints – twice a day for up to two hours – for the purpose of force-feeding. We agree with the president of the American Medical Association, James Lazarus, who wrote in the British Medical Journal that “in the AMA's view, the use of restraints to force-feed detainees is an inhumane and degrading intervention that falls within the prohibition of torture.”

It is sometimes claimed that force-feeding is necessary to save lives. But the experience of countries that eschew force-feeding, including the United Kingdom and Israel, is that following ethical standards and adhering to medical professionalism does not result in the deaths of prisoners. We urge you to bring in physicians not beholden to commanders who can establish a relationship of trust with detainees, provide care in accordance with our traditions of professionalism, and respect ethical requirements.

In your June speech on national security, you said in reference to force-feeding, “Is this who we are? Is that something our founders foresaw? Is that the America we want to leave our children?”

We would answer a firm “No.” This practice is inconsistent with American values and the medical values and professional responsibilities that are so central to the role physicians, including military physicians, play in our society, no matter who the patient is.

It is time for the Administration to reaffirm our values, respect the human rights of detainees, and restore the ability of doctors to adhere to their clinical and ethical responsibilities by ending the force-feeding of hunger strikers.

Sincerely yours,

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