

Editorial

IMANA Statement on the Question of Forced Feeding of Hunger-striking Detainees in U.S. Custody

*Ethics Committee
Islamic Medical Association of North America*

We, members of the Ethics Committee of the Islamic Medical Association of North America (IMANA), are writing in reply to a request from the U.S. Department of Defense to comment on the question of forced feeding of hunger-striking prisoners in U.S. custody. To that end, we state the following:

We choose to follow the World Medical Association's Declaration on Hunger Strikers,¹ which unambiguously states that forced feeding is a form of inhuman and degrading treatment. We support previous statements on this matter made by physician organizations and others. In particular, we wish to emphatically state our support for statements such as that published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* on September 28, 2006,² which asserted that "...physicians cannot follow military orders to force-feed competent prisoners without violating basic precepts of medical ethics never to harm them by means of their medical knowledge." We also support the American Medical Association (AMA) statement on March 10, 2006,³ as well as the open letter published in *The Lancet*⁴ published on the same date, which states in part "We urge the U.S. government to abandon techniques such as force-feeding and restraint chairs forthwith. These techniques are contrary to the World Medical Association Tokyo Declaration of 1975, which prohibits force-feeding of prisoners."

As American citizens and proud members of the country where we live and serve as medical professionals, we especially wish to support the February 23, 2007, statement of Physicians for Human Rights, "Ten Steps to Restore the United States' Moral Authority,"⁵ and above all ask that the United States: hold abusers of detainees accountable, prohibit abusive interrogations, and close Guantanamo Bay without delay. We also ask, along with others, that the U.S. Government follow the ruling of the U.S.

Supreme Court that says these detainees are subject to the Geneva Conventions. We also ask that these detainees get a fair trial. They should be charged and punished if guilty and freed if they are innocent. We have serious concerns about the moral standing of the United States, and remind our fellow Americans of the beliefs in liberty and human rights that bring us together and define us as a nation.

At the same time, we believe that suicide to avoid suffering is clearly unlawful in Islam. Given the gravity of suicide in the Islamic tradition,⁶ we do not understand how a Muslim detainee would proceed with a hunger strike to the point of death except as a form of protest and for the purpose of drawing attention to his grievances. In these circumstances, those grievances must be addressed. Such people should be given full access to medical care, pastoral care, and mental health services to best assess the intention of their actions and to counsel them on the grave consequences of suicide in Islam. Notwithstanding our support of the views of the cited medical bodies, we would consider life-supporting measures in such very limited and extreme circumstances and only after a thorough medical and mental health evaluation with independent supervision and observation, situations that to our knowledge do not currently exist in Guantanamo. These life support measures should be by intravenous alimentation and not by forced feeding through nasogastric tubes and definitely not in constrained chairs, as these may be a form of torture in and of themselves. (See *New England Journal of Medicine* article.)

Although IMANA is the largest Muslim Medical professional organization in the United States, it is neither a regulatory agency nor a religious authority for the Muslim community of North America. It is ready to meet with officials from the U.S. Department of Defense and all other relevant agencies to voice our concerns, provide them with rele-

vant policies, and offer our expertise with the sole goal that American treatment of detainees meet with established ethical standards of all practicing U.S. physicians. We likewise support the AMA's efforts to advocate that all detainees in U.S. custody be treated in accordance with the AMA Code of Medical Ethics⁷ and the Geneva Conventions.⁸ We hold to an ideal to serve America as one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

This statement was written by the Ethics Committee: Hossam E. Fadel, MD, chairman; and Wahaj D. Ahmad, MD, Malika Haque, MD, Faroque A. Khan, MD, and Hasan Shanawani, MD, members. It was approved by the Executive Committee of the Islamic Medical Association of North America (IMANA) on November 5, 2007.

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