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American Psychological Association Supports Authors' Recommendations

Response to: "Contrasting ethical policies of physicians and psychologists concerning interrogation of detainees" (*British Medical Journal*, 2009; 338: b1653)

The American Psychological Association (APA) wholly endorses the three recommendations proposed by Kenneth Pope and Thomas Gutheil at the conclusion of their article. I would like to elaborate on these points, while taking the opportunity to clarify several critical issues pertaining to our APA Ethics Code.

The authors first recommend that adherence to a code of ethics should govern professional conduct and that one should not be allowed to escape personal responsibility by following orders or laws. When APA convened the 2005 Presidential Task Force on Psychological Ethics and National Security (PENS Task Force), the very first order of business was to state that the APA Ethics Code applies to *all* of psychologists' professional activities regardless of whether a psychologist is acting in a health care-related role or not. The task force also stated that the best ways to ensure ethical behavior are: "The development of professional skills and competencies, ethical consultation and ethical self-reflection, and *a willingness to take responsibility for one's own ethical behavior*" [emphasis added], mirroring the very words Drs. Pope and Gutheil encourage APA to adopt.

In this context, it is critical to emphasize that the APA Ethics Code prohibits torture and that when the current version of Ethical Standard 1.02 (which addresses conflicts between ethics and law) was drafted in the fall of 2000, the language was in no way intended or foreseen to provide a defense to engaging in torture based on "following orders." In light of the Bush administration interrogation policies, the APA Ethics Committee views it as crucial to clarify that "following orders" can never be a defense to torture under the APA Ethics Code. APA's governing body, the Council of Representatives, will be reviewing this ethical standard with association-wide input at its upcoming meeting at the APA convention in August.

APA's most recent policy action has restricted the scope of the earlier PENS Task Force recommendations related to the involvement of psychologists in national security investigations by prohibiting psychologists from working in detention settings that are in violation of international law and the U.S. Constitution, except in very



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narrowly defined roles. Immediately after a membership vote in 2008, APA informed key Bush administration officials and members of Congress of this new policy. APA is ensuring that officials in the Obama administration are likewise informed of APA's position.

The authors' second recommendation relates to the importance of enforceable ethical standards to protect at-risk groups. Although the APA Ethics Code does not specifically use the word "detainee," multiple standards in the Ethics Code—such as the ethical standard mandating that psychologists avoid doing harm—clearly apply. To suggest that the APA Ethics Code provides greater protections to laboratory animals than to U.S. detainees abroad (or prisoners in U.S. correctional facilities, who are also not explicitly mentioned in the code) is simply absurd.

Their third and final recommendation stresses the importance of educating APA members and encouraging their involvement in critical issues before the profession, such as the humane treatment of detainees. To this end, APA has used all available means to inform our members and the general public of our policies through APA publications, our Web site, regular mailings, and press releases. The relatively small percentage of members who voted on our most recent policy resolution noted above may indeed be more reflective of the general public's limited response to voting opportunities than to our members' lack of attention to the role of psychologists in interrogations. The clear majority of those members who voted did so in favor of the resolution, which is now official APA policy.

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