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20 years of advancing health, dignity and justice

June 14, 2007

Sharon Stephens Brehm, PhD, President
American Psychological Association.
750 First Street, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4242

Dear Dr. Brehm:

As you know, Physicians for Human Rights has been engaged in a long-term dialogue with the American Psychological Association over our strenuous objections to the APA's policy on psychologists and interrogations. PHR deeply respects and values the rich legacy of vital contributions made by psychology and the APA to human health and well-being, and to human rights in particular. We also welcomed the policy the Association passed last summer affirming the centrality of human rights for psychologists.

We have also been concerned that neither that policy, nor the PENS Task Force report and recommendations, adequately assure guidance to psychologists in interrogation settings. New revelations from the Department of Defense about the role of psychologists in designing and implementing interrogation methods that amount to torture increase the urgency for action, particularly a clear statement that psychologists should not support these and related techniques in any way.

The revelations come from a recently declassified report by the Pentagon's Office of the Inspector General ("OIG").¹ The report confirms that psychologists with the Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape ("SERE") program, in collaboration with the Guantanamo interrogation command and the Army Special Forces Command, transformed torture methods used in "resistance training" for US personnel into procedures for interrogations at Guantanamo. It appears likely, moreover, that at least one and possibly more of the PENS Task Force members were involved in these activities.

These methods include stress positions, prolonged sleep deprivation, isolation, "noise stress" (including sensory bombardment with loud music and strobe lights), sexual humiliation, forced nudity, exposure to extreme cold, exploitation of

¹ "Review of DoD-Directed Investigations of Detainee Abuse," Department of Defense Office of the Inspector General. Accessed June 7, 2007 at <http://www.fas.org/irp/agency/dod/abuse.pdf>.

detainees' fears and phobias, and much more. In a September 21, 2006 letter to Senator John McCain, the APA's then-president, Dr. Gerald Koocher, joined other mental health experts in warning that such practices "can have a devastating impact on the victim's physical and mental health" and condemned them as "torture and cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment."

According to the Pentagon report, SERE psychologists trained Guantanamo interrogators and other military psychologists on "Behavioral Science Consultation Teams", or "BSCTs", in the use of these interrogation methods. BSCT psychologists were tasked with transforming abusive SERE methods into standard operating procedure at Guantanamo and, at least twice, SERE psychologists were sent to Guantanamo to teach "SERE counter-resistance techniques" to interrogation teams. SERE methods were brought to Afghanistan and to Iraq, where SERE psychologists taught the techniques to interrogators with Task Force-20, a special forces unit, which also adopted them as standard operating procedure. SERE psychologists were even authorized "to actively participate in 'one or two demonstration' interrogations" with Task Force-20 personnel.

These revelations by the Pentagon, confirming that military psychologists served as chief architects of torture, demand forceful and definitive action by the APA, particularly to reject these interrogation methods and prohibit any role of psychologists in designing, implementing, training, or observing their use or evaluating detainees subjected to them. Reiteration of the Association's general policy against torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment is not enough. The psychological profession and the nation as a whole are now looking to the APA for more – for explicit, operational guidance that will help put an end to the abusive SERE interrogation methods and to psychologists' involvement in their use. More broadly, they look to the APA for concrete measures that will fully protect psychology and its practitioners from being used to "break" detainees down.

We therefore urge that, at a minimum, the APA immediately take the following steps:

1. Adopt an organizational policy that explicitly condemns all of the following interrogation methods as torture and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment and affirming that it is unethical to participate in any way, directly or indirectly, in their use. These methods include:
 - Mock executions
 - "Water-boarding" or any other form of simulated drowning or suffocation
 - Threats of harm or death to the detainee or a member of his or her family
 - Isolation used for the purpose of interrogation
 - Sensory deprivation (particularly of light and auditory stimuli)
 - Sensory bombardment (particularly with loud noise or music, bright lights, or flashing strobe lights)
 - Hooding
 - Sleep deprivation
 - Forced nakedness
 - Sexual humiliation
 - Cultural or religious humiliation
 - Exploitation or exacerbation of fears, phobias or psychopathology such as anxiety or depression
 - Stress positions (including "short shackling" and prolonged standing)
 - Use of animals, including dogs, to instill fear

- Physical assault, including slapping and shaking
 - Exposure to extreme heat or cold
 - Induced hypothermia
 - The threatened use of any of these techniques
 - Use of psychotropic drugs or any other mind-altering substances in support of interrogations
2. Adopt an organizational policy calling on all relevant branches and agencies within the US government – including Congress, the Department of Defense, and the Central Intelligence Agency – to explicitly prohibit the use of these methods in all interrogations and informing them that in any event psychologists are prohibited from participating in them.
 3. Open an investigation into the role of psychologists, whether APA members or not, in the use of the techniques listed above.
 4. Urge all relevant oversight bodies, including the Senate Armed Services and Intelligence Committees, to engage in comprehensive investigations and to hold public hearings into all aspects of the development, authorization, and use of these interrogation methods by military and intelligence personnel.

Adoption of these recommendations would be an important first step toward ending the use of methods amounting to torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment by US interrogators, as well as psychologists' complicity in designing or implementing them. In our view, however, explicitly prohibiting psychologists' participation in these techniques will not fully protect psychological ethics from the risks inherent in the interrogation setting. We believe the only way to create a fully ethical policy, consistent with the principle of minimizing harm, is for the APA to prohibit the direct participation of psychologists in any individual interrogations.

The nature of the interrogation process is such that any participation invites the possibility of serious ethical breaches. A fundamental purpose of interrogation, even when lawful, is to break the resistance of unwilling or uncooperative subjects. In the stressful and isolated national security interrogation environment, where the pressure to intensify "counter-resistance" measures only increases over time, psychologists have little or no protection from becoming complicit in the infliction of psychological distress, pain, and suffering. We therefore suggest the following ethical guidance:

Psychologists do not participate directly in the interrogation of an individual prisoner or detainee. Direct participation includes being present in the interrogation room; asking questions; suggesting questions; providing any advice, consultation, or assistance regarding the use of interrogation techniques with a specific interrogation subject; or monitoring an interrogation for the purpose of offering advice, consultation, evaluation or assistance in the use of techniques with a particular subject.

Psychologists do not offer general advice or training, research, experimentation, facilitation, or any other general assistance, outside the context of an interrogation of a specific subject, regarding use of interrogation methods that are intended to, or that the psychologist has reason to believe will, result in increased levels of psychological distress or harm to the subject.

Sharon Stephens Brehm, PhD, President

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Consistent with these recommendations, PHR also continues to support the resolution currently before the Council of Representatives calling for a "Moratorium on Psychologist Involvement in Interrogations at US Detention Centers for Foreign Detainees." We believe that all these recommendations, taken together, can help restore the legacy the American psychological community expects and deserves.

We would be happy to meet with you at a convenient time to discuss these matters further. Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Leon S. Rubenstein". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Leonard S. Rubenstein, JD
Executive Director