AMA calls for inquiry into doctors' role in abuse of prisoners

Susan Mayor *London*

The American Medical Association (AMA), the professional body for doctors in the United States, is supporting calls for a new investigation into whether doctors were complicit in the torture of prisoners held by US military forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.

James Rohack, chairman of the AMA's trustees, has written to the US defence secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, supporting a recommendation by the US army investigator, Major General George Fay, for an inquiry into the possible failure of medical professionals "to properly document and report the abuse" of detainees.

The association, which can censure, suspend, or expel any member found to have violated its principles of medical ethics, has offered any such inquiry its expertise in professional ethics and clinical medicine.

The association has given a copy of its letter to Mr Rumsfeld to the BMA and the UK based charity Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture, which made it public this week.

The move follows publication of articles in the *New England Journal of Medicine* (2004;351:415-6) and the *Lancet* (2004;364:725-9) reporting evidence of direct medical involvement in the torture of prisoners by US military forces and indirect involvement in the planning of sophisticated psychological and physical techniques used against detainees.

The BMA and the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture wrote to the AMA in August asking it to take disciplinary action against medical professionals found to have been involved in torturing prisoners (*BMJ* 2004;329:472, 28 Aug). The letter stated: "It now appears that the system of torture at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, in Afghanistan (and probably at Guantánamo Bay) has corrupted a number of American medical professionals working for, or with, the US military."

It continued: "Lest the healing profession be accused of doing further harm, it is incumbent on the medical profession and medical establishment in general, and

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An Iraqi detainee at the Abu Ghraib prison is restrained after suffering injuries to both legs, possibly as a result of dog bites

in our view, on the American Medical Association in particular, to take disciplinary action against any of its own who have knowingly violated the basic principles of medical ethics."

Sherman Carroll, a spokesperson for the medical foundation, said: "We are pleased that the AMA, which, in the past has made forceful policy statements against torture, has shown its will-

ingness to help arrive at the truth. The onus is now on the US military and civil authorities to initiate a thorough investigation of such alleged ethical and criminal abuses as falsifying death certificates."

Michael Wilks, chairman of the BMA's ethics committee, added: "The BMA fully supports the AMA in its call for an investigation into these serious accusations." □

BMA says scientists should take part in bioterrorism debate

Lynn Eaton *London*

The danger that some of the science in the rapidly expanding field of biotechnology may be misused to develop lethal weapons is one of the biggest threats to international security, warned Professor Malcolm Dando, head of peace studies at Bradford University, at the launch of the BMA's latest report on biotechnology and weapons.

The report also says that scientists need to be at the forefront of the debate on how they police their own communities to

reduce the risk of scientific information being misused.

It outlines what it describes as the "alarming gap between the quickening pace of scientific discoveries that could be misused and the desperately slow development of international arms control." It updates an earlier report from the BMA five years ago, published before the attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001.

Professor Dando said that the 1997 convention on chemi-

cal weapons had ensured tighter controls in that sector and that the science behind nuclear weapons was "decades old." But the failure to strike an effective agreement on biotechnology—resulting in part from the unwillingness of the United States to sign up to an international treaty in 2001—had left scientific advances wide open to misuse for harm rather than good.

"If you are going to say where is our biggest concern, it is clearly in biotechnology," he said. "The biggest threat remains that we will see the development of state level biological weapons programmes."

He said the US decision meant that rather than having an effective method for monitor-

ing states we now have only a series of annual meetings on set topics. The next, to be held in Geneva in June 2006, will be looking at codes of conduct. It was vitally important that scientists were aware of this discussion and contributed to it, he said.

However, although the United States had pulled out of the international agreement, since 2001 it had introduced various measures to monitor scientific experiments more closely for possible threats to security. □

Biotechnology, Weapons and Humanity II is available from the BMA's Science and Education Department or from bookshops, price £9.99.