A new book on a shocking medical specialty

The Torture Doctors
Human Rights Crimes and the Road to Justice

“Miles examines the Torture Doctor as 'healer and beast,' revealing how the two parts 'make a distinctive whole.' His data-driven narrative of descent into Medical Hell is a journey of the soul we can dare with Miles as our unfrightened guide—engaging us to challenge Torture Doctors in our own regimes.”

—Jean Maria Arrigo, PhD, 2015 AAAS Award for Scientific Freedom and Responsibility

“A brutal exposure of medicine’s global torture maze by a master researcher.”

—George Annas, Center for Health Law, Ethics & Human Rights, Boston University School of Public Health

Doctors take an oath to do no harm. But, as Steven Miles reveals in The Torture Doctors, there are some who stray from their role as promoters of health and human rights. Torture doctors are medical professionals who work on behalf of their governments to enable and engage in torture.

These doctors participate in torture in three main ways: they falsify death certificates by attributing death to accident rather than murder; they invent and administer techniques to inflict pain and suffering without leaving scars; and they use their expertise to keep prisoners alive throughout their ordeal. At least one hundred countries employ torture doctors, including the United States. They have been able to carry on with near impunity, protected by their governments, medical associations, and licensing boards.

This book fearlessly explores who these doctors are, their motivations, what they do, how they escape justice, and what we can do about it. A movement within the human rights community has begun to hold doctors who abet torture accountable, but there is still work to be done. A groundbreaking portrayal of a hidden medical specialty, The Torture Doctors ultimately provides a roadmap for how the medical and human rights communities can come together to end these atrocities.

Steven H. Miles, MD, is a professor emeritus of medicine and bioethics at the University of Minnesota Medical School. He previously managed the Doctors Who Torture Accountability Project and is a past president of the American Society of Bioethics and Humanities, from which he received the Distinguished Service Award and Lifetime Achievement Award. His books include Oath Betrayed: America’s Torture Doctors and The Hippocratic Oath and the Ethics of Medicine.

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A Q&A with author Steven H. Miles, MD

How prevalent are torture doctors in today’s world? In which countries do torture doctors practice?

Torture doctors work in every country that tortures; democracies and autocracies, open societies and closed states. On the other hand, in all but the most repressive torturing societies, there are physicians who faithfully report torture.

Torture doctors escaped accountability to the law and licensing boards until the 1970s–decades after the Nuremberg Trials led the public falsely to believe these perpetrators would answer for their atrocities. Why did it take so long for torture doctors to be brought to justice? What was the catalyst?

Even while the Nazi Doctors’ trial was underway at Nuremberg, the Cold War led the East and West to recruit torture doctors from Germany and Japan for military research. Impunity became the norm for governments, national medical societies, licensing boards, and even the World Medical Association that was founded on the Nuremberg promise of accountability for medical crimes against humanity. The modern human rights movement crystalized in the mid-seventies, and it began to hold torture doctors accountable.

Who are the people who betray their oaths to become torture doctors? Do they often fit a certain profile, or share characteristics?

Few are psychopaths. Torture doctors are mostly careerists who collaborate to obtain government positions or simply choose to overlook the tortured people they see in their practice. They devise and oversee methods of torture, treating persons undergoing torture to keep them alive for future interrogation. They falsify medical records and death certificates and devise techniques that do not leave scars with the intent of concealing torture.