International Council of Nurses supports right of nurse to refuse to force-feed prisoners at Guantanamo Bay

Geneva, Switzerland, 20 November 2014 – The International Council of Nurses (ICN) and the World Medical Association (WMA) have called on the U.S. Navy to respect the rights of the nurse who has refused to take part in the force-feeding of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, and called for his reinstatement.

Citing the UN Declaration on Human Rights, the ICN Code of Ethics for Nurses and the ICN Position Statement on the Nurses’ Role in the care of Detainees and Prisoners, Dr. David Benton, ICN’s Chief Executive Officer, said, “ICN strongly affirms that nurses should play no voluntary role in any deliberate infliction of physical or mental suffering. To do otherwise is a clear violation of nursing’s ethical code of practice.”

Dr. Xavier Dea, President of the WMA, said: “The WMA fully supports the ICN on the rights of health professionals to refuse to force feed prisoners. Our position on force feeding is quite clear. It is violent and against the principle of individual autonomy and no physician or nurse should be forced to take part in the practice. Quite apart from being an entirely unsuitable approach to save lives, the practice is a degrading treatment, inhumane and might amount to torture.”

According to the nurse’s attorneys, a U.S. Naval nurse has refused to participate in the force-feeding of a group of detainees at Guantanamo Bay detention center in Cuba who are on a renewed hunger strike to protest their continued, open-ended detention without charges being filed. The Chief of Naval Personnel will be making the decision of what action will be taken against the nurse.

ICN affirms that individual nurses should be protected from reprisals related to advocacy for detainees and prisoners or refusal to participate in forced care, cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment.

ICN has been working closely with the American Nurses Association and Physicians for Human Rights in their public support of the nurse. ANA has stated that “The ANA Code of Ethics for Nurses clearly supports the professional registered nurse's right to make an independent, ethical judgement about whether he or she should participate in this or any other such activity.”

Although ICN accepts that in today’s society nations need to establish security measures to protect their citizens and thwart the actions of terrorists, it stresses that a fine balance must be struck if we are to uphold the Declaration of Human Rights.

This point was eloquently made by U.S. President Barack Obama at the National Defense University on 23 May 2013. He stated, “Look at the current situation, where we are force-feeding detainees who are being held on a hunger strike. Is this who we are? Is that something our Founders foresaw? Is that the America we want to leave our children? Our sense of justice is stronger than that."
Note for Editors

The International Council of Nurses (ICN) is a federation of more than 130 national nurses associations representing the millions of nurses worldwide. Operated by nurses and leading nursing internationally, ICN works to ensure quality care for all and sound health policies globally.

The World Medical Association (WMA) is the global federation of National Medical Associations representing the millions of physicians worldwide. Acting on behalf of patients and physicians, the WMA endeavors to achieve the highest possible standards of medical care, ethics, education and health-related human rights for all people.

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