

# Could a new UN resolution end doctors' participation in torture?

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A new UN resolution has the potential to fight torture and cruelty say experts in the British Medical Journal today.

The resolution, passed in March 2009, goes further than previous rulings, say the authors and spells out that "states must never request or require anyone, including medical or other health personnel, to commit any act of [torture](#) or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment".

Lead author, Dr Peter Polatin from the Rehabilitation and Research Centre for Torture Victims in Denmark, says there is substantial evidence that health professionals have been involved in torture around the world, for example in Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq in the mid-1990s, in Israel and in Guantanamo Bay.

Polatin argues that doctors' involvement could either mean directly participating in torture or assessing detainees to ensure that they will not die from the torture practices they are being subjected to. He adds that doctors working for the state, military, prison or police service "may be obliged to serve the interests of their employer, to the detriment of [medical ethics](#)".

The new UN resolution could help the fight against torture "because it targets states, urging them to act to prevent [health workers](#) from becoming involved in torture and to protect those who stand out against it" says the paper. In addition to this, the resolution calls upon the UN

special rapporteur on torture to give special attention to "medical complicity".

In conclusion, the authors emphasise the need to enforce the powers of the resolution. This could be by strengthening the investigative function of the rapporteur to "ensure that more cases of medical complicity will be subject to the public scrutiny and that violators will face disciplinary action, including suspension of their professional licence".

Provided by British Medical Journal

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