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Policy over military interrogations **divides psychologists**

By Adam Fifield

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PHILADELPHIA

PHILADELPHIA _ Controversy over a year-old American Psychological Association policy allowing members to participate in military prisoner interrogations threatens to dominate the group's annual convention in New Orleans this week.

The debate, fueled by reports of alleged abuses of detainees at the U.S. military prison at Guantanamo Bay, focuses on whether the psychologists are more likely to serve as ethical monitors or to become accomplices to cruelty.

More than 1,500 psychologists have signed an online petition to protest APA guidelines that permit members to consult on "interrogation and information-gathering processes for national security purposes."

"We will not stand by and remain silent while our profession throws overboard its concern for human dignity by becoming complicit in inhumane institutions," the petition states.

Some psychologists said they supported the APA policy, which also bans members from assisting in torture or degrading treatment, and requires them to report such conduct. But most worried that mental-health professionals could be overruled, or co-opted, in military settings.

Psychologists help ensure that interrogations remain "safe, legal, ethical and effective," said Stephen Behnke, director of the APA ethics office. "You want to have people who understand the science, and who understand that torture and abusive treatment lead to bad information."

Psychologists can help elicit information to prevent terrorist attacks, said Frank Farley, a Temple University psychology professor and former APA president, who backs the policy.

There is a need to interview people, Farley said, adding that to think otherwise is "naive."

"Having a person who subscribes to APA ethics in the room at the time can only be a good thing," Farley said.

Others are grappling with the issue. "I'm not sure this is where psychology belongs," said Julie Levitt, of Philadelphia.

Levitt leans toward opposing psychologists as consultants, she said, because of concerns about the military interrogators.

If they are "basically moral people" and "adhere to Geneva conventions, then it's certainly appropriate to help," said John Rooney, head of La Salle University's master's program in clinical counseling. But, he said, it's hard for an outsider to know.

Reported abuses of detainees at Guantanamo Bay have cast a pall over the debate. Critics of the APA policy cite news reports _ and a 2005 New England Journal of Medicine article _ charging that health-care professionals helped interrogators design coercive practices. The military has disputed the allegations.

"You get the best information from rapport-building and relationship-building, and the psychologists here do that," said Lt. Col. Lora Tucker, a Guantanamo spokeswoman.

Under military guidelines released in June, psychologists and psychiatrists on behavioral science consultation teams can "observe, but shall not conduct or direct, interrogations."

The teams have been responsible for reviewing detainees' medical histories for "depression, delusional behaviors, manifestations of stress, and 'what are their buttons,'" a 2005 Army surgeon general's report said. They have also helped determine "when to push or not push harder" for information.

(EDITORS: BEGIN OPTIONAL TRIM)

The military typically uses psychologists rather than psychiatrists, William Winkenwerder, assistant secretary of defense for health affairs, said in June. The American Psychiatric Association and the American Medical Association take positions more restrictive of their members' roles in interrogations.

"I was shocked and embarrassed at my organization's being chosen by the military to be the sole representative on these ... teams in Guantanamo," said Steven Reisner of Columbia University's International Trauma Studies Program.

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Of the APA's 10-member task force behind the policy, six members have military ties, Salon.com reported last month. Four, including a Navy psychologist who reportedly protested abuses at Guantanamo, are on active duty. According to the APA Web site, others on the force have been in Afghanistan and Abu Ghraib.

"That seemed to stack the deck," Reisner said.

The task force unanimously agreed on its primary recommendations, Behnke countered.

(EDITORS: BEGIN OPTIONAL TRIM)

Emily K. Filardo, who teaches psychology at Kean University in Union County, N.J., said she worried that having psychologists at interrogations would legitimize practices over which they have no control.

"The Army can say, 'You see, things are OK. We have psychologists who've checked it out,'" Filardo said.

Andrew Jensen, a Cherry Hill, N.J., psychologist who treats veterans, favors the APA position and suspects its foes are motivated by "the current political climate."

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Behnke said his group recognized the obligations of psychologists to individuals and to the nation.

"We need to take a look at how we balance those against one another," he said.

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