

Medically enforced feeding of detained asylum seekers on hunger strike

Sir,

The Austrian government has presented a new law this week which demands and legalises medically enforced feeding of detained asylum seekers on hunger strike. Doctors are thought to take part in this process for instance in positioning nasogastral feeding tubes. This is definitely alarming and is not in agreement with international medical standards. The World Medical Association has established guidelines for doctors involved in managing people on hunger strikes. The Declaration of Tokyo (1975) and the Declaration of Malta (1991) both prohibit the use of non-consensual force-feeding of hunger strikers who are mentally competent [1, 2]. The doctor's duties in handling a prisoner on hunger strike are well defined: A doctor should acquire a detailed medical history of the patient and should carry out a thorough examination. The hunger striker must be professionally informed by the doctor of the clinical consequences of a hunger strike, and of any specific danger to his own particular case. Any treatment administered to the patient must be with his approval. The doctor should ascertain on a daily basis whether or not the patient wishes to continue with his hunger strike. The doctor should also ascertain on a daily

basis what the patient's wishes are with regard to treatment should he become unable to make an informed decision. Prison doctors should be aware of their ethical and legal responsibilities, and that they should act independently of government interests [3].

Georg Röggl

References

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3. Kenny MA, Silove DM, Steel Z (2004) Legal and ethical implications of medically enforced feeding of detained asylum seekers on hunger strike. *Med J Aust* 180: 237–240

Correspondence: Prim. Doz. Dr. Georg Röggl, AKH Neunkirchen, Peischingerstraße 19, 2620 Neunkirchen, Austria, E-mail: roeggla.interne@khneunkirchen.at

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