



Medicine, the Law & You

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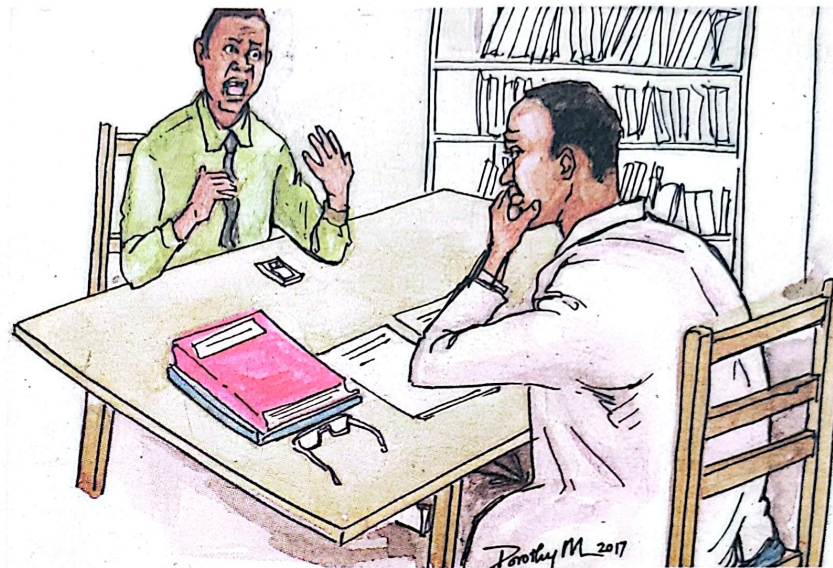
TORTURE CASES: The psychological effects of torture are devastating and victims should be handled with extra care.

The assessment of the psychological effects of torture is vital in the evaluation of a suspected victim of torture as it can provide very important forensic evidence of the abuse. The overall goal of such an examination is to establish the degree of consistency between an individual's account of the torture and the psychological findings observed during the evaluation.

How it is carried out

A psychological assessment of a victim of torture is carried out by getting a detailed history of the victim's life and behaviour before and after the alleged incidence, then carrying out a mental status examination and assessing the victim's social functioning. A psychological assessment is a very sensitive examination and if not carried out carefully and professionally, may re-traumatise the victim and induce fear and mistrust. The medical examiner should therefore aim at winning the victim's confidence by communicating a sense of understanding of the victim's experi-

Torture: How to assess psychological effects



ence. The medical examiner should be supportive, proactive, empathetic, sensitive and non-judgmental. When the victims are poorly handled they may be unable to effectively tell what happened to them.

Reactions

The medical examiner should explain this particular interview process in details to the victim to prepare the victim for the difficult emotional reactions that the questions may provoke. The victim should also be given breaks or be allowed to interrupt or stop the interview should the stress become unbearable. The medical examiner should be aware that the interview process may remind the victim of the

interrogation during torture. Negative feeling such as guilt, rage, revulsion, helplessness, shame, confusion, panic or hatred may manifest during the interview process. The medical examiner should know how to cope with such reactions and explain the reasons for such feeling to the victim in order to deal with the victim's

INTERPRETERS

An independent and experienced interpreter should be used when there are challenges of a language barrier between the medical examiner and the victim. Such an interpreter may be able to recognise and pick out issues relevant to the psychological assessment.

predicament. A torture survivor may look at a medical examiner as a person in a position of authority and may therefore not trust the examiner with certain aspects of the trauma history. However, the victim, if still in custody, may have exceptionally high expectations of the medical examiner and therefore be too trusting yet the medical examiner cannot guarantee that there will be no reprisals.

Effect on medical examiner

Medical examiners are often themselves affected by the accounts of torture narrated by the victims and this can limit their ability to objectively evaluate the patient. The reactions may range from detachment and indifference to a feeling of disillusion-

ment and helplessness. The health worker may even develop feelings of guilt and lack of confidence in handling some of the grave cases. Some health workers may be emotionally involved to the extent that they develop anger and repugnance towards the perpetrators.

If the medical examiner senses that the victim is not telling the truth but is making these allegations for personal gain, the examiner may develop negative feelings towards the victim. The medical examiner in all these scenarios may also need help from their peers to cope up with such pressures.

The examination

The mental state examination and the assessment of the social function of the victim are important at arriving at a diagnosis. The mental state examination involves observing the victim's appearance and behavior during the consultation process. The victim's mood, memory and thoughts should be evaluated. The social functioning of the victim is assessed by inquiring into the person's daily activities, social role and recreational activities as well as the presence or absence of chronic fatigue.

Conclusion

At the end of the evaluation, a health worker should decide whether the psychological findings are consistent or not consistent with the alleged report of torture or extreme stress, past or ongoing. These finding should also be evaluated in the context of the time-frame of torture as an individual may be at the recovery stage. Physical conditions such as head injuries may contribute to the psychological manifestations and should be noted. And the medical examiner should also decide if there are suggestions of false allegations of torture.

To be continued ...

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