



Medical Researcher Imprisoned and Sentenced to Death during a Congress Visit

Siroos Mirzaei^{1*}, Maria Kletecka-Pulker² and Thomas Wenzel³

¹Department of Nuclear Medicine, Wilhelminenspital, Austria

²Department of Nuclear Medicine, University of Vienna, Vienna

³Department of Psychiatry, University of Vienna, Vienna

Abstract

Especially in medical ethics and humanitarian medicine, an interdisciplinary approach is required in order to understand the implications of a specific problem or case. We present the case of a Swedish-Iranian medical doctor who has become the victim of severe human rights abuses after arrest, being the guest of an Iranian University. We discuss the implications as to medical ethics and possible interventions by the international medical community in a situation where medical doctors and health care professionals become increasingly the target of politically motivated human rights abuses.

Introduction

As physicians, we're often confronted with serious issues of medical ethics and human rights at different levels especially but not only in the rapidly deteriorating situation in the near east. Medical doctors and other health care personnel can be affected by human rights violations and can become "case examples" and victims of crime in their specific function as health care professionals and academics. International solidarity, as demonstrated by the World Medical Association and NGOs such as "Scholars at risk" are important in such cases [1].

Case Presentation and Ethical Implications

In the following case report we want to discuss the ethical implications in the situation of a physician, Ahmadreza Djalali, who has been imprisoned and sentenced to death in Iran because of allegations of spying for other countries [2,3]. Up to now none of the international protests and activities for his unconditional release has proven to lead to any significant positive development.

Ahadreza Djalali is a Swedish-Iranian academic and researcher who was convicted to death penalty for allegedly spying in Iran in a legal process seen as seriously flawed by international independent bodies and organizations such as Amnesty International and WMA [4,5]. Djalali is an internationally respected and well established academic and is a lecturer at the prestigious Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, and also a visiting professor at Belgium's Free University of Brussels [1,2]. According to information the authors has received from his relatives, he denied to cooperate in delivering sensible information from Europe to Iran. He was arrested while visiting Iran in April 2016 for academic reasons as guest at the University of Teheran [6] and then convicted for allegedly spying for Israel. He had earlier confessed on Iranian State Television for spying on behalf of Israel [7] in a process remindful of Stalin area show processes. Amnesty International stated however that the confession was taken under duress [4], and asked later on for his transfer to a hospital because of deterioration of his health situation [8] described in the next paragraph. Iran confirmed the death penalty against Ahmadreza Djalali in early February 2018 [9].

In the following months he was reportedly exposed to acts that would be in direct violation of accepted standards of international standards such as the Mandela Rules for treatment of prisoners and the UN Convention against Torture [10,11] as discussed below. He was reportedly kept in solitary confinement for several months, without access to a lawyer and authorities reportedly threatened to harm his children living in Europe (report from family member to author SM). Further several restrictions were applied to him, such as against going to outside walks and fresh air or against using the prison library (report from family member to author SM).

In February 2018, United Nations human rights experts urgently called on Iran to lift the death

OPEN ACCESS

*Correspondence:

Siroos Mirzaei, Department of Nuclear Medicine, Wilhelminenspital, Montleartstraße 37, 1160 Vienna, Austria;

E-mail: mirzaei@gmx.at

Received Date: 21 Oct 2019

Accepted Date: 26 Nov 2019

Published Date: 02 Dec 2019

Citation:

Mirzaei S, Kletecka-Pulker M, Wenzel T. Medical Researcher Imprisoned and Sentenced to Death during a Congress Visit. *Clin Case Rep Int.* 2019; 3: 1127.

Copyright © 2019 Siroos Mirzaei. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

sentence against Dr. Djalali, following up on a letter of Nobel Prize winners made public on 21 November, according to "Nature" [7]. In particular, as he was earlier this year unexpectedly transferred to an undisclosed location, where he was held in solitary confinement, there was a fear of his imminent execution and many other medical organizations such as Austrian Medical Society and Scholars at Risk asked his immediate release from prison [12,13]. Djalali is according to our information furthermore denied any urgently required specialized medical care as reported earlier this year [14]. A doctor who examined him in prison in early 2019 said that Djalali should be seen by doctors specialized in hematology and oncology in a hospital outside of prison. Since his arrest on 26 April 2016, he has reportedly lost more than 20 kg and now weighs about 50 kg (report from family member to author SM).

In February 2019 he was scheduled to be transferred to a hospital outside of prison to see a specialist, but, on the day of the transfer, he was told that the transfer was conditional on him being shackled and wearing a prison uniform. He protested against these degrading conditions and the transfer was cancelled [14].

The case presented demonstrates the need for global action and professional solidarity and to establish strategies and mechanisms to support medical doctors that are in increasing danger of being targeted to become hostages or in a most general sense, victims. The case presented documents also that Universities and medical conferences might not be any more a safe and impartial meeting ground for scientific exchange, but can be abused for political reasons, if no immediate action is taken to stop this development. This obligation cannot be limited to human rights organizations like Amnesty but requires professional solidarity. Consequently, both the WMA and local medical associations like the Austrian board of physicians have become active in cases such as the above and have taken clear positions in cases like that of Prof. Korur mentioned before [5], but also in the case of Ahmadreza Djalali presented in this case report [15]. The WMA president, who has reacted immediately on an appeal, has stated that He is a prisoner of conscience and there is no evidence that he is anything other than an academic pursuing his profession "and that "since his detention, he has been denied his fundamental human rights and he has undergone solitary confinement and psychological torture" [15].

In general, international binding standards such as the UN Convention Against Torture (CAT) [16,17] and the Mandela rules for minimal standards in the treatment of prisoners [10] (usually monitored by the ICRC) are often disregarded and should protect all prisoners against denial of adequate care, inhuman and degrading

treatment and against psychological or physical torture. Physicians, in this case in Iranian prisons have ethical obligations to monitor and follow this standards and might have neglected them in the above case, to the disadvantage of their own colleagues, though they might be in turn at risk without international support. An independent and until now avoided international examination by the UN Special rapporteur should be invited by the Iranian government to disprove the serious concerns raised in this case.

References

1. Djalali A. Protecting scholars and the freedom to think, question, and share ideas. Scholars at Risk.
2. Wikipedia. Ahmad Reza Jalali. 2019.
3. Mirzaei S. Human Rights Day: What roles do physicians play in human rights issues? 2018 Dec 10 [Cited 2019 July 10]. In: BMC Series blog.
4. Iran: Prominent academic sentenced to death after grossly unfair trial". Amnesty International. 2017.
5. WMA expresses shock at turkish physician leaders' prison sentences. World Medical Association.
6. Dr. Ahmadreza Djalali Sentenced to Death in Iran. Committee of concerned scientists. 2017.
7. Catanzaro M. Nobel laureates demand release of Iranian scholar facing death sentence. Nature. 2017.
8. Amnesty International. Gefangener schwer krank. 2019.
9. Advocaat: "Doodstraf van Iraanse VUB-prof Djalali is opnieuw bevestigd". Vrt NWS. 2018.
10. Promoting fair and effective criminal justice. Penal Reform International.
11. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CAT.aspx>
12. Arzt droht im Iran die Todesstrafe: Ärztekammer ersucht Republik Österreich um Hilfe.
13. Iran: Release Dr. Ahmadreza Djalali. Protecting scholars and the freedom to think, question, and share ideas. Scholars at Risk. 2019.
14. Iran: Further Information: Jailed Academic Needs Urgent Medical Care: Ahmadreza Djalali. Amnesty International. 2019.
15. WMA's urgent plea for release of doctor facing death penalty. World Medical Association.
16. Rasmussen OV. The medical aspects of the UN Convention against Torture. Torture. 2006;16(1):58-64.
17. Ritom MH. Medical care for people under detention. Med J Malaysia. 2003;58 Suppl A:72-7.