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Letter turns up heat on psychologist

By Andrew Welsh-Huggins
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COLUMBUS, OHIO -- The American Psychological Association is taking the unprecedented step of supporting an attempt to strip the license of a psychologist accused of overseeing the interrogation of a CIA detainee.

The association told a Texas licensing board in a July 1 letter that the allegations against James Mitchell, contained in a complaint filed by another Texas psychologist, represent "patently unethical" behavior that is inconsistent with the organization's ethics guidelines.

Association spokeswoman Rhea Farberman said the letter is the first of its kind. "The allegations put forward in the complaint and those that are on the public record about Dr. Mitchell are simply so serious, and if true, such a gross violation of his professional ethics, that we felt it necessary to act," Farberman said.

In an interview, Mitchell called the complaint libelous and said it is "riddled throughout with fabricated details, lies, distortions and inaccuracies." He added that he was "not free to discuss any work I may have done for the CIA."

Mitchell is a retired Air Force psychologist who participated in the 2002 CIA interrogation of detainee Abu Zubaydah, according to a 2008 Senate Armed Services Committee report on the treatment of detainees in U.S. custody.

Interrogators in Thailand subjected Zubaydah to severe cold, food and sleep deprivation, confinement in a narrow box and, with Mitchell participating, a simulated form of drowning known as waterboarding, according to the complaint filed with the Texas State Board of Examiners of Psychologists.

"Regardless of what legal categories these techniques fall within, one conclusion is clear: a psychologist who helps inflict such cruel and shocking abuse on a defenseless human being would appear to have violated basic standards of conduct of the profession," said the complaint by Northwestern University law professor Joseph Margulies and filed on behalf of a Texas psychologist.

Sherry Lee, the Texas board director, said that complaints are shielded under Texas law and that she could not comment.

The association is monitoring similar filings in Ohio and New York made Wednesday against psychologists who oversaw detainee interrogations at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, but has no plans to back those efforts.

Boards in California, Louisiana and New York have rejected similar complaints. But new sources of information, such as the Armed Services report, provide details that make the complaints stronger, said Kathy Roberts, staff attorney with the Center for Justice and Accountability.

In 2008, the association voted to ban its members from taking part in interrogations at the prison at Guantanamo Bay and other military detention sites where it believes international law is being violated.

Zubaydah was arrested in Pakistan in March 2002 on suspicion of being a top al-Qaeda official. He was the first detainee subjected to Bush administration-approved harsh interrogation techniques.

-- Associated Press

http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/07/10/AR2010071002896_pf.html