Medical ethicist to discuss Abu Ghraib prisoners’ health and human rights

By Kevin Brown

How should medical professionals act when their patients’ human rights are at risk?

Dr. Leon Eisenberg, Harvard Medical School professor of psychiatry and social medicine, was stunned when he heard of abuses of prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and Guantánamo prison in Cuba.

“I’ve been active in protesting torture of prisoners in other countries—it’s very distressing,” Eisenberg says.

“I could hardly believe it to be true. Clearly doctors went along with misrepresentations to keep things under cover.”

Eisenberg, who with his wife, Carola, in May received the American Psychiatric Association 2005 Human Rights Award, will give the 10th annual Waggoner Lecture on Ethics and Values in Medicine at 4 p.m. Nov. 16 in Ford Auditorium of University Hospital.

Titled “When Good Men and Women Do Nothing—Doctors at Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo,” his talk will focus on the ethical obligations of medical professionals in situations where human rights may be threatened or abused. Eisenberg says doctors have a responsibility to follow guidelines set by medical societies to report patient mistreatment.

Since 2003, news reports and medical journals have focused on the role of health care personnel at Abu Ghraib in treating injuries inflicted by U.S. service members on prisoners of war and documented that treatment or causes of death in medical records—but not reporting evidence of torture to authorities. Other reports have stated that medical and psychological records prepared by health professionals who treat detainees at Guantánamo have been used to develop interrogation tactics.

In the case of Iraq, Eisenberg says it was troubling that prisoner abuses were reported not by medical staff, but by an infantry captain whose information reached Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., who then brought it to light.

“Part of the problem is there is insufficient emphasis to standing up to authority in medical education,” Eisenberg says, adding some are afraid of negative evaluations by superiors should they be challenged.

“We need to change the climate in medical schools.”

Eisenberg will explain how medical professional societies have set guidelines for ethical behavior in the face of potential rights violations, and examine the ethical and moral obligations of doctors and others in such situations.

He also will address questions of mental health professionals refusing to let military officials use their records to devise new ways to interrogate detainees, and how medical personnel should act when patients’ human rights are at risk.

In addition to his wide-ranging human rights work, Eisenberg is a world-renowned child psychiatrist who has led research on school phobias and autism. He has received multiple awards, including honors from the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences. He was a captain in the Medical Corps of the U.S. Army in the late 1940s.

The Waggoner lecture is named for the late Dr. Raymond Waggoner, who died in June 2000 at the age of 98. He was chair of the Department of Psychiatry from 1937-70, and a noted psychiatrist, medical administrator and government advisor who was one of the first to see mental illness as both an emotional and physical problem.