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Forced feeding of hunger strikers

Dear David

Thank you for your letter of the 31st of May regarding the possible forced feeding of Palestinian political prisoners in Israeli prisons and detention centres.

As I am sure you know, the BMA has clear policy, extending back many years, respecting the rights of competent and un-coerced adults to refuse food for political reasons. This extends to a respect for an advance refusal where the individual subsequently loses capacity, provided this is the explicit, competent and informed wish of the individual. In our view, it is unethical for doctors to override a competent refusal of food. This is also the position of the World Medical Association, as set out in the Declaration of Malta, which explicitly states that doctors must respect the autonomy of individuals.

In the past we have written both to the Israeli Medical Association and, in the context of Guantanamo Bay, the US government, supporting this position. Where we have clear evidence from reputable independent sources that doctors are involved in the forced feeding of individuals who have made a competent refusal, we will write to the relevant authorities to draw attention to the matter. Where appropriate we will work through our international channels, including the World Medical Association, to make our concerns known. Ordinarily, these letters are posted on the human rights section of our website so that our members are informed of our work in this area.

I hope this reassures you of our commitment to maintaining the highest standards of ethical practice in medicine.

Yours sincerely,
Mark Porter
BMA council chair

