



Call for input by the UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions

“The death penalty from the perspective of the prohibition against torture and other forms of ill-treatment and the protection of human dignity”

Contribution of the World Medical Association

1. The [World Medical Association](#) (WMA) is the global federation of National Medical Associations, representing millions of physicians worldwide. Its mission is to safeguard the independence of the medical profession and to promote the highest standards of ethical behaviour and medical care for all. The WMA develops and disseminates ethical guidance on a wide range of issues, including health-related human rights, in order to protect and defend the fundamental rights of both patients and physicians.
2. The WMA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the mandate of the Special Rapporteur by addressing the human rights and medical-ethical concerns raised by the death penalty. This submission approaches the issue through the lens of the absolute prohibition of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, and the imperative to uphold human dignity at every stage of life.

The WMA’s position on the death penalty and medical ethics

3. The WMA is opposed to capital punishment and supports the call of the United Nations General Assembly for a global moratorium on the use of the death penalty¹, with a view to its eventual abolition. It reaffirms that physicians must not participate in any aspect of an execution. As stated in [WMA Resolution on Prohibition of Physician Participation in Capital Punishment](#), *“it is unethical for physicians to participate in capital punishment, in any way, or during any step of the execution process, including its planning and the instruction and/or training of persons to perform executions.”* Any use of medical knowledge or clinical skills for purposes that do not advance health, wellbeing, or patient welfare violates a fundamental principle of medical ethics.

Death row, a form of abusive solitary confinement, amounting to torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment

4. From both a human rights and medical-ethical perspective, the conditions usually associated with death row confinement are profoundly alarming. Prolonged isolation, the irreversibility of the punishment, and the continual anticipation of execution produce a unique and severe form of psychological and physical suffering, incompatible with human dignity.

¹ [WMA Statement on the United Nations Resolution for a Moratorium on the Use of the Death Penalty](#)

5. The [WMA Statement on Solitary Confinement](#) offers an important ethical parallel. The WMA denounces the harmful health effects of solitary confinement, which can result in serious psychological and psychiatric disorders, including insomnia, confusion, hallucinations, psychosis and the aggravation of pre-existing health problems as well as an increased risk of self-harm.
6. In accordance with the Nelson Mandela Rules², the WMA condemns prolonged or indefinite solitary confinement, defined as isolation exceeding 15 consecutive days, and recognises it as a form of torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Such practices, which cause intense mental and physical distress, conflict with the core ethical principles of the medical profession and established human rights standards. They must be strictly prohibited.
7. Death row conditions, which can involve years or decades of near-total isolation, clearly fall within the scope of these concerns.

Recommendations

8. Detention conditions on death row - marked by prolonged and/or indefinite solitary confinement, persistent uncertainty regarding the timing and circumstances of execution, and exposure to severe and sustained psychological distress - are incompatible with States' obligations under the absolute prohibition of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.
9. Until the death penalty is fully abolished, States should urgently eliminate all conditions and practices associated with death-row detention, in line with their obligations under the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). In doing so, States should be guided by the Nelson Mandela Rules as authoritative standards on humane treatment and ensure that the treatment of all persons deprived of their liberty fully complies with these international human rights standards.
10. The WMA stands ready to support efforts to protect the rights, health, and dignity of all persons deprived of liberty and reiterates its unequivocal commitment to upholding medical ethics in all settings, without exception.

23.02.2026

² United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (SMR), 2015