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Guantanamo Bay and Medical Education: A Marriage of Convenience?

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No Funding was received for the writing of this article.

On June 12, 2008 the Supreme Court of the United States in a 5-4 ruling held that detainees at the Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp indeed had a right to the habeas corpus under the United States Constitution.¹ In arguing for the majority opinion Justice Anthony Kennedy asserted that the United States has had jurisdiction over Guantanamo for over 100 years, although Cuba still has formal sovereignty, so constitutional protections including habeas corpus did apply to detainees. The decision essentially disqualified the executive branch's rationale for choosing Guantanamo to hold suspected terrorists as being out of the reach of domestic and international law.²

Both 2008 Democratic and Republican nominees for the U.S. Presidency have articulated support for the closure of the Guantanamo. Senator Obama has asserted the need to close a "sad" chapter in American history and "...while we are at it, we can close down Guantanamo and we can restore habeas corpus and we can lead with our ideas and our values."³ Senator McCain has also been critical of the detention center stating, "Guantanamo Bay has become an image throughout the world which has hurt our reputation," although more recently he described the court's decision as "one of the worst decisions in the history of this country."^{4,5} The landmark decision, though significant, leaves the question of the future of Guantanamo unanswered. America's own defense secretary, Robert Gates, has expressed wonderment about "what we ought to do next," and admitted that America is "stuck" with Guantanamo.² Therefore, as it stands this impasse may require an unconventional approach to reach a positive resolution. One of the greatest thinkers of our time, Albert Einstein in a widely attributed reference has argued "we can not solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them." Critics of Guantanamo claim that the rationale behind the camp, is to provide an expedient way to get around American and international Human Rights conventions. Thus, applying Einstein's logic, we might consider how Guantanamo can contribute meaningfully to alleviate human suffering.

One approach may lie in the ostensibly unrelated field of medical education. Our group has developed a recent research focus on the positive and negative effects of globalization on medical education. We note that a multitude of international organizations are working with renewed vigor to tackle the disparities in basic health care and the human cost of devastating epidemics such as AIDS worldwide. Part of this effort includes increasing the number of trained health care practitioners in order to meet the global demand for health care. Developing international standards for training and practice are also

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related to this imperative. Unfortunately however, there is a current deficit of supply to demand in the 'market' for medical education. In this context an intriguing development has been the trend of prestigious North American medical schools packaging their curricula, assessment methods and at times their entire operations into an exportable commodity, often purchased by wealthy nations that are still developing their academic medical systems. One salient example is the Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar. Established in September 2004, as a joint initiative with the Qatari government, it was the first American medical school outside the United States.⁶ However, despite its groundbreaking nature, for the moment, it finds itself in an accreditation vacuum. While the curriculum, pedagogical approaches, evaluation methods and even many of the faculty members are taken directly from the New York school, the actual campus is not located in the United States. Thus it is unclear what accreditation body will accredit this school.

The Qatar school Dean said, "The Medical College brings the same quality of education offered by Cornell University in the United States to students in Qatar and the wider region." And that "Students in Qatar will get a degree from Cornell just like our students in New York do."⁶ The implication is that the Liaison Committee on Medical Education (the body that jointly accredits medical schools in Canada and the US) might accredit the school in Qatar. The Dean continued, "The LCME has never dealt with this, but they understand this is the beginning of the globalization of American medicine."⁷ Yet the LCME's accreditation guidelines state that the committee does not "accredit programs provided outside the U.S. and Canada, even if the school responsible for the program operates in the U.S. or Canada."⁸ The implication is that a medical school must be geographically located in the U.S. or Canada. Interestingly, the LCME has accredited medical schools in Puerto Rico, although it is officially designated a self-governing unincorporated territory of the U.S.⁹

In light of the recent Supreme Court decision that has clarified the status of Guantanamo Bay as being under U.S. jurisdiction, one may pose an argument that a medical school located in this picturesque tropical setting would be eligible for accreditation by the LCME. In fact, the basic infrastructure for a medical school already exists at the detention center in the form of buildings, administration offices, recreation/catering facilities, a/v and communications technology and most importantly a state-of-the-art clinical setup. A senior administrator at the detention center's clinical facility has compared it to "a community acute-care hospital."¹⁰ Medical students would enjoy the idyllic setting and benefit from the useful elective clinical opportunities available on both the Cuban mainland which boasts an excellent healthcare system, and in nearby Florida a mere 90 miles away.

In the context of an increasingly dominant global mindset that sweeps away inconvenient barriers to development such as national borders, currencies, cultures and identities, why not imagine an international bastion of medical education built upon the abandoned site of national embarrassment and international controversy? What better way to restore America's image, as

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Barack Obama declared, "the last best hope on Earth," than to replace an icon of hegemony with an institute of healing and set a standard in sustainable development in one fell swoop.

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