

Clinical Psychologist Lissa Johnson on Julian Assange: “A maximum security prison is no place to treat a torture victim”

By Laura Tiernan
25 November 2019

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Australian clinical psychologist Lissa Johnson about an open letter issued by medical doctors in defence of imprisoned WikiLeaks journalist and publisher Julian Assange.

Doctors are calling on the UK Home Secretary to transfer Assange from Belmarsh maximum security prison to a properly equipped university teaching hospital. They warn there is no time to lose. Dr Johnson has stood at the forefront of global efforts to win Assange’s freedom.

WSWS: How did you become involved with the open letter and how would you describe its significance, especially considering the number of signatories?

Lissa Johnson: The letter’s organisers contacted me looking for signatories and an Australian spokesperson. Given the gravity and urgency of the situation facing Julian Assange, and the devastating wider implications, I was grateful for the initiative and the opportunity to become involved.

I would describe the letter’s significance as historic. We are facing an unprecedented situation in which a publisher and journalist is being tortured, possibly to death, on UK soil. The world’s designated authority, UN Rapporteur on Torture Professor Nils Melzer, has put the world on notice that Assange is showing all symptoms typical for prolonged psychological torture, and that he may soon die in Belmarsh Prison as a result.

This is absolutely a matter for health professionals. To remain silent in the face of such an atrocity is complicity. The signatories to the open letter understand this and the urgent need to sound alarms over the medical emergency that prolonged

psychological torture entails. A maximum-security prison, whose conditions amount to ongoing torture, is no place in which to treat a torture victim.

The fact that this open letter has attracted so many signatories in such a short space of time is remarkable. It is a testament to the magnitude of the medical, ethical and human rights travesty we are facing. Despite the relentless campaign of harassment, vilification and abuse that has been directed at Julian Assange, and often at those who defend his rights, these doctors are undeterred.

WSWS: How serious is the situation facing Julian and why are doctors urging his transfer from Belmarsh? What sort of care does Julian need in your opinion?

LJ: The situation facing Julian is extremely serious. The UN Rapporteur on Torture has issued warnings about his life for good reason.

As well as emotional and cognitive harm, psychological torture affects physical health via the impact of perpetually elevated stress physiology. The precise impacts and time course of this process are impossible to predict, but can include cancer, cardiovascular pathology and the health impacts of immunosuppression.

As there is no way to know exactly when and how such potentially fatal stress-related health issues might strike, leaving Julian Assange in Belmarsh under conditions of isolation, arbitrariness and abuse is effectively playing Russian Roulette with his life. This is particularly so given his years of medical neglect and fragile health in the Ecuadorian Embassy.

Accordingly, no doctor, no matter how confident, qualified or senior, can legitimately assert that Julian

Assange's life is not at risk in Belmarsh Prison.

The kind of care that Julian Assange needs is appropriately specialised and consultative care in a multidisciplinary setting, such as a teaching hospital. Given that Julian Assange has been assessed as suffering the symptoms of prolonged psychological torture, and given his prior years of serious medical neglect, his is a complex case. Complex cases require consultation and liaison between appropriately specialised health professionals across different areas of expertise, often involving second and third opinions. This protects against medical negligence and malpractice, and ensures objectivity, harm minimisation and competent care.

In addition, as well as attending to potentially life-threatening health issues, Julian Assange requires structured neuropsychological testing to assess his cognitive function, given his exposure to prolonged isolation, both in Belmarsh Prison and the Ecuadorian Embassy. Just seven days of solitary confinement can cause reduced brain activity that may prove permanent. After two weeks, memory, concentration and information-processing deficits can occur, which may also persist after solitary confinement ends. In light of the obvious implications for Julian Assange's ability to stand trial and prepare his defence, such possibilities must be carefully investigated using gold-standard neuropsychological protocols, urgently.

WSWS: What would you say to fellow psychologists, doctors and other people about the importance of taking a stand and getting involved in the campaign for Julian's freedom?

LJ: Don't be complicit. The psychological literatures teach us that collective violence and atrocity, such as torturing a publisher for journalism, can only take place with the help of passive bystanders. Atrocity thrives on citizens standing idly by, declining to take a stand. So, speak up. Doing nothing is an act of omission, which amounts to active participation in the abuse at hand.

Often people would like to speak up but feel helpless, unsure of how to make their voice heard. For health professionals, the open letter to the UK Home Secretary provides a powerful way to break the silence and take a stand, not only in defence of Julian Assange but against torture.

By standing with their colleagues who are calling for Julian Assange's immediate transfer from Belmarsh

Prison, health professionals are not standing alone. They are standing with the world's designated authorities on imprisonment, human rights, torture and international law, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention and the UN Rapporteur on Torture.

There is no time to waste. If Julian Assange does die in prison, we will lose our chance to become a society that doesn't torture its journalists to death. And health professionals will lose their chance to stand on the right side of history. The very integrity of our profession is at stake.

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