

An open letter from doctors Julian Assange “could die in prison”

24 November 2019

The following letter was authored by more than 65 eminent medical doctors from the UK and around the world, calling for urgent action to protect the life of imprisoned WikiLeaks founder and journalist Julian Assange.

We write this open letter, as medical doctors, to express our serious concerns about the physical and mental health of Julian Assange. Our professional concerns follow publication recently of the harrowing eyewitness accounts of Craig Murray and John Pilger of the case management hearing on Monday 21 October 2019 at Westminster Magistrates Court. The hearing related to the upcoming February 2020 hearing of the request by the US government for Mr Assange’s extradition to the US in relation to his work as a publisher of information, including information about alleged crimes of the US government.

Our concerns were further heightened by the publication on 1 November 2019 of a further report of Nils Melzer, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, in which he stated: ‘Unless the UK urgently changes course and alleviates his inhumane situation, Mr Assange’s continued exposure to arbitrariness and abuse may soon end up costing his life.’

Having entered the Ecuadorian Embassy in London on 19 June 2012, Mr Assange sought and was granted political asylum by the Ecuadorian government. On 11 April 2019, he was removed from the Embassy and arrested by the Metropolitan Police. He was subsequently detained in Belmarsh maximum security prison, in what Mr Melzer described as ‘oppressive conditions of isolation and surveillance.’

During the seven years spent in the Embassy in confined living conditions, Mr Assange was visited and examined by a number of experts each of whom expressed alarm at the state of his health and requested that he be allowed access to a hospital. No such access was permitted. Mr Assange was unable to exercise his right to free and necessary expert medical assessment and treatment throughout the seven-year period.

Medical doctors have a professional duty to report suspected torture of which they become aware, wherever it may be occurring. That professional duty is absolute and must be carried out regardless of risk to reporting doctors. We wish to put on record, as medical doctors, our collective serious concerns and to draw the attention of the public and the world to this grave situation. (After extensively quoting from the available medical reports)

The World Health Organisation Constitution of 1946 envisages ‘the highest attainable standard of health as a fundamental right of every human being.’ [20] We are indebted to those who have sought to uphold this right in the case of Mr Assange.

From a medical point of view, on the evidence currently available, we have serious concerns about Mr Assange’s fitness to stand trial in February 2020.

It is our opinion that Mr Assange requires urgent expert medical assessment of both his physical and psychological state of health. Any medical treatment indicated should be administered in a properly equipped and expertly staffed university teaching hospital (tertiary care). Were such urgent assessment and treatment not to take place, we have real concerns, on the evidence currently available, that Mr Assange could die in prison. The medical situation is thereby urgent. There is no time to lose.
