

A cancer on body politic

Gitmo a medical, legal limbo

By JOHN CHANDLER
and CURREY HITCHENS

Sent to Guantanamo in 2003, 60-year-old Abdul Razzaq Hekmati, a hero of the war against the Taliban, died of colon cancer nearly five years later on Dec. 30, 2007. Hekmati never had a colonoscopy — the routine procedure for detecting colon cancer popularized and publicized by CBS' Katie Couric after her husband's death.

A colonoscopy in 2003 might have detected the cancer and saved Hekmati's life; indeed, colon cancer is entirely preventable if doctors detect and remove precancerous growths. Instead, in 2007, Hekmati was given painkillers, the treatment of choice for men in Guantanamo. And he died in Guantanamo never having been charged with a crime, never having had a fair hearing and despite the fact that several prominent men in Afghanistan were willing to travel to Guantanamo and testify that Hekmati had been improperly detained, since he had lived in exile since 1999, returning to Afghanistan only after the Taliban had been overthrown.

Too bad that his surname sounded a lot like that of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the warlord who tried to overthrow the U.S.-backed government in Afghanistan. For you see, in Guantanamo the "judges" — untrained military officers — presume that falsehoods are true. They are required by the Donald

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Rumsfeld-created system of Combatant Status Review Tribunals to do so.

The witnesses from Afghanistan? The military panel found they were not "reasonably available." Hekmati was never told the names of his accusers. He was also never told the names of his doctors. Imagine being treated for cancer without knowing your doctor's credentials, or even her name.

A detainee at Guantanamo Bay does not have the option of deciding to visit a physician for

appropriate routine health examinations that might detect the presence of cancer; he has no choice about who treats him and how; he never even gets to give his informed consent to the treatment he does receive.

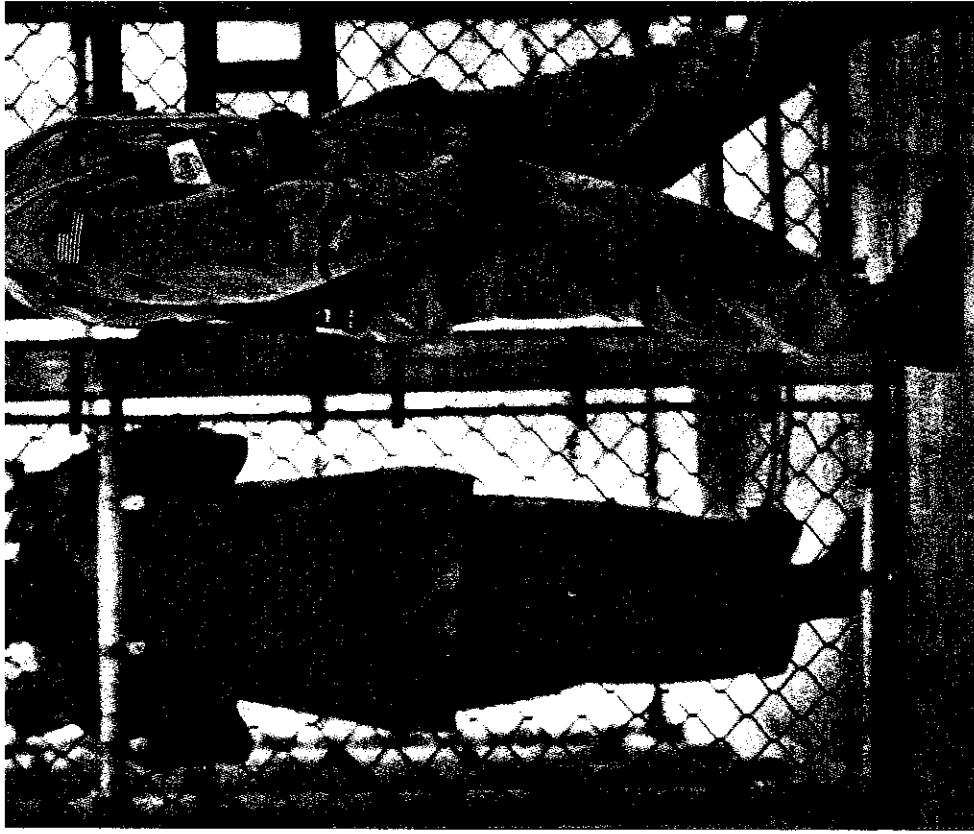
We do not know what type of treatment Hekmati received for his cancer other than painkillers, nor do we know whether, with proper medical care, the disease could have been diagnosed earlier. What we do know is that Hekmati died from

this highly treatable disease while in the care of the United States government.

Similarly, one of our clients starting his seventh year in Guantanamo has blood pressure regularly clocked at numbers like 168/120 and 207/103. For a 45-year-old man, 120/80 is normal. Does he have serious heart disease? Well, by any measure he has dangerously high blood pressure. He takes Zestoretic for high blood pressure and Lipitor for high cholesterol (plus 16 other medicines, some of which are contraindicated). The doctors at Guantanamo have suggested procedures such as a cardiac catheterization for him, but he refuses. Why?

Would you agree to be treated by a doctor who would not tell you his name? Are you willing to trust yourself to a doctor who covers his name so you cannot see or figure out anything about his skills? Our client has asked the military to tell us (not him) the doctor's name and credentials so we can investigate and advise him. Guantanamo is a small naval base with an unsophisticated hospital.

Guantanamo, of course, refuses — why do anything for these terrorists? We have alternatively asked that the client be treated at a U.S. military hospital, that we be permitted to send a cardiologist to see him or that he be sent



Associated Press / 2005 photo
In the Gordian knot of Guantanamo, many detainees are beginning their seventh year still not having been accused of any crime. They are treated by doctors who cover up their name tags, the don't get health screenings and can't choose their treatment; painkillers are used as therapy.

home to Yemen. Answers: no, no and no. Guantanamo just says, "trust me."

With his written consent, we have asked for the client's medical records. No. We filed a Freedom of Information Act request with every conceivable government agency to obtain his records so that we might have another physician review them. Guantanamo and a dozen other government agencies claim not to have them.

And what did this client do? In 2002 he had the misfortune to be in Pakistan when one of the locals sold him to the Americans for a bounty. He has never been charged with a crime. The allegations by the government, presumed to be true in Combatant Status Review Tribunals, include the claim that his Casio watch could have been used to set off a bomb. The same watch is sold at the Navy Exchange in Guantanamo for \$18. He is also accused of going to Afghanistan for the first time in 2002 and having taught at a terrorist training camp in Afghanistan in 2000. Those dates are not misprints — under the Guantanamo system it is presumed true that he first went to Afghanistan in 2002 before he was there in 2000. Our country's treatment of the men in Guantanamo decry throughout the civilized world. Assistant Attorney General Michael Wiggins testified that these men could be held in perpetuity. Many are starting the seventh year of what must be like a life sentence, never having been charged with crime, never having been court.

One more black eye for Guantanamo and the United States — these men are the victims of our medical and judicial shortcomings.