MEDIA RELEASE

Resettlement in Papua New Guinea is not the answer

Several prominent mental health peak bodies are extremely concerned about the health and mental health impacts on asylum seekers on Manus Island.

The Mental Health Professionals’ Association, made up of the Australian College of Mental Health Nurses (ACMHN), the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP), the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP), and the Australian Psychological Society (APS), are concerned that the Government is failing to comply with its international obligations in relation to protecting individuals and families seeking asylum, who are typically very vulnerable, from the risk of physical and mental health deterioration.

“We were concerned about the health and mental health of people housed on Manus Island before the announcement to transfer all boat arrivals to Manus Island”, said Adjunct Associate Professor Kim Ryan, CEO of the ACMHN.

“Australian governments have been told for more than 10 years that uncertainty, trauma and re-traumatisation, hopelessness, separation from family, contribute to poor mental health, and yet they continue to place people in such settings,” Ms Ryan continued.

“The Island is not equipped to cater for the people currently there, let alone more”, Ms Ryan said. “PNG is a poor country with a serious lack of health care services”.

President of RANZCP, Dr Murray Patton said, “We remain concerned that highly vulnerable people are living in conditions known to be damaging to their social and emotional wellbeing, growth and development.”

RACGP President, Dr Liz Marles said the RACGP had grave concern that the government’s recent decision to transfer all boat arrivals to Manus Island was putting the psychological welfare of an already traumatised group of people at greater risk.

“The RACGP has a long history of advocating for compassionate high quality health care services for all people living and seeking asylum in Australia. Access to appropriate, quality health care is a basic human right in any civilised society.

“Many refugees and asylum seekers have experienced traumatic events such as persecution, exposure to conflict, physical deprivation, and in some cases, torture or other human rights abuses. There is significant evidence that these pre-immigration experiences have a significant effect on the physical and emotional well-being of individuals and families. It is critical that alternative and supportive arrangements be put in place to assist this already vulnerable group”, Dr Marles said.

APS Executive Director, Professor Lyn Littlefield said, “the evidence is clear, that long periods of detention combined with uncertain settlement outcomes will result in high levels of psychological distress that will substantially increase the risk of mental illness”.

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Along with peak medical bodies, the Greens are proposing an Expert Health Care Panel, supported by the MHPA, which will be independent of Government, empowered to make genuine change, and mandated to report directly to Parliament every six months on the health and mental health of men, women and children detained offshore.

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