Detention Health Advisory Group

MEDIA RELEASE
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Detention centres failing to meet minimum standards of mental health care, experts say

Health professionals such as psychologists and mental health nurses are under intolerable pressure trying to provide adequate care within the detention system, according to their professional bodies.

Representatives of the Australian Psychological Society and the Australian College of Mental Health Nurses, together with the Department of Immigration’s Detention Health Advisory Group (DeHAG), have expressed concern that conditions and restrictions in the detention system are making it impossible for health professionals to meet the basic standards for mental health care mandated by the Australian Government, as well as those required within their professions.

Speaking on behalf of the Australian Psychological Society, Adjunct Associate Professor Amanda Gordon said: “We know from reports of those working in the system that many staff are inadequately trained and supported, and often become overwhelmed by despair. Suicides among some staff, as well as among detainees, have been reported, which indicates how terribly out of control the whole system has become. We are really concerned for our members’ wellbeing as staff, as well as for the plight and obvious pain of the detainees themselves.”

She continued: “This Government has begun to commit itself to reducing mental illness in our country. We must now ensure that this admirable commitment is extended to detainees, who are among the most vulnerable people in our community. Asylum seekers have often survived trauma and torture, followed by a dangerous journey to Australia. For too many, indefinite detention in a hot, remote setting far removed from any normal family or community life is the last straw in their battle for survival – and many are wrongly labeled as troublemakers as symptoms worsen.”

The recently released paper from the Centre for Policy Development details how minimum standards were removed from the contracts of detention system service providers, and calls for an end to mandatory detention for children and their carers. It calls for the establishment of new accommodation centres in which services can be better provided, and which would be more cost effective than the current system.

Professor Louise Newman, a psychiatrist and Chair of DEHAG, said it was unacceptable and counterproductive that the National Practice Standards for the Mental Health Workforce were not applied to detention settings.

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Professor Newman said: “The system is in crisis, and the result is an epidemic of self-harm and suicide, and while all this is happening, health professionals are not being granted access or are limited in what they can provide to those in such acute distress. Basic standards must be restored to ensure effective health care for those detained in this way, and to ensure that those who join the Australian community as refugees do not do so with mental health further compromised.”

The statement follows recent reports that a mental health nurse with 25 years’ experience had been dismissed after voicing criticisms of the system.

Adjunct Associate Professor Kim Ryan, Chief Executive Officer of the Australian College of Mental Health Nurses, said: “Health professionals need to be able to work within the same standards that protect Australians and ensure the care they receive is effective and safe. They must be able to express concerns if they believe that conditions contradict their professional duty of care, which is all about protecting and working in the best interests of those they are caring for.”

Ms Ryan went on: “In 2005 representatives of nine mental health sector organisations urged the Government to implement the National Practice Standards in all detention centres. All these years later we face a worsening mental health crisis in the system, that year by year is more costly and more damaging. These conditions cannot be allowed to continue.”

All three experts have called upon the Minister for Mental Health and Ageing to intervene to ensure that mental health professionals can provide support to detainees consistent with that expected within the broader community.

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For more information or to request an interview, please contact Judith Heywood on j.heywood@psychology.org.au or 03 8662 3301 or 0435 896 444.