MEDIA RELEASE

Department refuses to release vital mental health details

Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) spokesman Sandi Logan has refused to say how many detainees in immigration detention centres were seen by GPs and how many by psychiatrists, claiming it would be an unreasonable use of resources for the Department to collate such information.

CEO of the Australian College of Mental Health Nurses, Kim Ryan, is appalled by his comments. “This is a clear example of why the standards of mental health care in Australia’s immigration detention centres need to be investigated”, she said. “This information should be on the public record – what is the Department hiding?”

The refusal to release such important mental health statistics follows a promise from DIAC to spend an extra $452 million on health for asylum seekers, after renegotiation contracts with health provider International Health and Medical Services (IHMS).

Without publicly available statistics, Ms Ryan is concerned about how that extra will be spent. “There is little accountability and no transparency on this issue”, she said, “How can monitoring the visits people make to a psychiatrist be a waste of time? This shows yet again DIAC has little understanding of the mental health care needs of those seeking asylum in Australia”.

Ms Ryan says the Department’s position on the matter raises several questions. “Is the Government seriously saying it can’t provide numbers on how many people see GPs and how many see psychiatrists, or does it just not want to say? How will the extra money be tracked, and an appropriate assessment of whether it helped the situation be made, without reliable data? This is utterly unacceptable. Information regarding the number of detainees who are seen by a psychiatrist and those seen by a GP is crucial to any assessments of the level of appropriate mental health care being provided in Australia’s immigration detention centres. Without an idea of the current situation, there is no way to track any progress and improvements resulting from the injection of money recently announced.”

Nearly 50 key health and mental health organisations, including the Mental Health Council of Australia – the peak, national non-government organisation representing and promoting the interests of the Australian mental health sector, have previously demanded the Government urgently review the standards of mental health care in immigration detention. Today’s comments by Mr Logan confirm the need for such a review.

Detainees have the right to mental health care commensurate with their need. There are genuine concerns that the Government is not providing adequate mental health care to people in detention centres at a time when incidents of self-harm and suicide have increased, and riots, protests, and hunger strikes have become common.

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