MEDIA RELEASE

Mental health of those in immigration detention needs to be protected

Several prominent mental health peak bodies are echoing the sentiments of refugee advocate Paris Aristotle and join him in calling for asylum seeker children and their families to be taken off Manus Island and be managed in Australia.

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.

Mr Aristotle visited Manus Island recently and expressed serious concerns about the arbitrary detention of asylum seekers there, particularly children.

CEO of the ACMHN, Adjunct Associate Professor Kim Ryan is appalled by the mental health standards in Australia’s onshore and offshore immigration detention centres. “Keeping asylum seekers detained in horrible conditions indefinitely damages their mental health and exacerbates any conditions they may already be dealing with”.

“Australia should be doing everything in its power to help those seeking asylum here, not locking them up and forgetting about them. This is a humanitarian issue, not a political one, we have a responsibility to ensure good mental health care and to prevent further suffering,” said Adj Assoc Prof Ryan.

President of The RANZCP Dr Maria Tomasic said, “Children and adolescents in detention, when there is no clear security risk, should be released into the community and have access to appropriate healthcare. Refugee children are society’s most vulnerable and it is essential to recognise and uphold their rights to care and protection.”

“We remain concerned that highly vulnerable children are living in conditions known to be damaging to their mental health, growth and development, particularly when more humanitarian solutions exist”, said Dr Tomasic.

RACGP President, Dr Liz Marles said, “the RACGP is deeply concerned that current policy related to mandatory detention increases the risk of mental illness in an already vulnerable and traumatised population. These individuals and families have experienced social upheaval that is typically related to trauma and/or fears of persecution in their country of origin, they are also significantly impacted by experiences encountered in their asylum seeking journey”.

“We know there are significant effects on the psychological and emotional health and development of children in detention. It is vital that alternative and supportive arrangements for children and unaccompanied minors in detention centres are actioned immediately, whilst trying to keep children with their families wherever possible”, Dr Marles said.
APS Executive Director Professor Lyn Littlefield said “Psychologists have always opposed the detention of children anywhere, but especially offshore. Psychological services really struggle to protect children’s mental health in this environment”.

According to Mr Aristotle, vital safeguards to reduce risks to mental health are not in place at the Manus Island detention centre, and something needs to be done immediately to address the lack of services available to detainees – children in particular.

The ACMHN has previously called for steps to be taken to improve the mental health of those detained in immigration detention, and, along with the RANZCP, the RACGP and the APS, repeats this call.

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