MEDIA RELEASE
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Mental health costs of detention are too high, experts say

Psychologists, mental health nurses, psychiatrists and other mental health professionals have called on the Government to abandon the indefinite detention of asylum seekers, in light of comments on the policy from a leading civil servant in the Immigration Department and revelations of an explosion in self-harm and starvation among detainees.

Andrew Metcalfe, the Secretary of the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, this week urged a rethink on mandatory detention as part of an opening address to a Senate Inquiry into the practice, questioning the effectiveness of the policy. Documents submitted to the Inquiry by the Department show that 213 detainees were treated for self-inflicted injuries and 700 for ‘voluntary starvation’ in the first six months of this year, as part of a system that now costs $772 million a year to maintain.

Representatives of the Department of Immigration’s Detention Health Advisory Group, the Australian College of Mental Health Nurses and the Australian Psychological Society said that the figures reflected concerns they had long raised on the negative impact of detention on the mental health of detainees and a growing body of evidence proving the harms caused by the policy. They said the Government failed to meet its own stated standards on mental health.

Professor Louise Newman, psychiatrist and chair of the Department of Immigration’s Detention Health Advisory Group (DHAG), said: “The magnitude of the problems in the detention system, such as the epidemic of self-harm and suicidal behaviour, constitutes a crisis. This is an unsustainable system and the Government must urgently implement the alternatives that exist, such as community detention.”

Speaking on behalf of the Australian Psychological Society, Adjunct Associate Professor Amanda Gordon added: “The clear scientific evidence of the harm caused by indefinite detention continues to mount. We know that the length and uncertainty of refugee processing and the policy of indefinite detention exacerbates trauma, and creates mental illness, in contravention of the Government’s own commitment to reduce it. These shocking figures reveal the depth and severity of problems in Australia’s detention centres.”

Adjunct Associate Professor Kim Ryan, Chief Executive Officer of the Australian College of Mental Health Nurses, said: “The mandatory and indefinite detention of asylum seekers should be ceased in favour of less restrictive and more cost-effective community-based alternatives. It is essential that the Government now to commit to implementing the most appropriate of these measures, rather than continue to exacerbate the trauma experienced by those fleeing war, poverty and conflict.”

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