

An open letter to the Australian Parliament to support immediate evacuation of those detained in Nauru and Papua New Guinea.

20/02/2023

An open letter to the Prime Minister and all members of the Australian Parliament,

We are a group of Australian healthcare professionals and organisations (doctors, nurses, and allied health professionals) who wish to express our concern about the harmful effects of Australia's system of offshore and indefinite detention on refugee and asylum seeker health. We also wish to express our strong support for the immediate evacuation of those detained in Nauru and Papua New Guinea (PNG).

Our position is not new. Since the re-commencement of offshore processing of asylum seekers in 2013, the medical community has publicly voiced its concern about the conditions of immigration detention both onshore and in offshore facilities in Nauru and PNG.

Fourteen deaths have occurred in offshore detention, with unacceptable delays in transfers to tertiary centres for urgent medical care being cited as a direct contributor to their deaths in coronial inquests. We do not view these incidents as tragic isolated events. The medical care that can be provided in offshore detention, despite investment from the governments of Australia, Nauru, and Papua New Guinea, remains far below the standard of that accessed by the general Australian public. Australian medical professionals who have worked in immigration detention facilities offshore have detailed the difficulties in escalating medical care, the lack of appropriate access to basic medications, and minimal emergency medical training of local health staff.

Conditions such as cellulitis (easily treated in Australian healthcare settings with oral antibiotics), have progressed to septicæmia and death in offshore detention without early intervention. Multiple reports of physical and sexual assault have been reported in offshore and onshore immigration detention. Currently, 148 men remain in Nauru and PNG, some without any path to resettlement. We hold grave concerns for their mental health after a decade in immigration detention. There is no question that their being trapped on Nauru and PNG is actively harming their mental health.

As medical professionals, we have already seen the destructive effects of indefinite detention on an individual's physical and mental health; this is recognised by the United Nations as a form of torture. Those of us in contact with refugees and asylum seekers detained in Nauru and Papua New Guinea note that incidents of self-harm and attempted suicide have occurred as recently as within the last two weeks. At least 13 men have reported severe symptoms of depression, reduced intake of food and water and feelings of hopelessness to a degree they can no longer meaningfully engage with any resettlement process. Most have already experienced significant trauma prior to and during the last decade of indefinite detention and are separated from their families. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the health inequities in this vulnerable group (many of whom suffer from chronic medical conditions because of an extended period of detention).

Outbreaks of COVID-19 have occurred in immigration facilities, worsened by overcrowding and low vaccination rates.

There are currently approximately 1100 individuals in Australia who have been transferred from Nauru and PNG. We ask for the almost 150 men remaining on Nauru and PNG to be evacuated immediately and brought to Australia for urgent medical evaluation and treatment. We also advocate for appropriate provision of medical care to those who were brought to Australia under the now repealed Medevac legislation who continue to wait for the medical care that they require.

This is not a politically motivated request. The healthcare of any individual detained in immigration detention by our government transcends politics. This is a call for immediate action on issues of basic and universal human rights. Australia, as a signatory to multiple international conventions protecting the rights of those seeking asylum (including children), is not fulfilling these obligations. The Australian medical community have united to call for action on refugee and asylum seeker health for many years.

The refugees and asylum seekers who are held on Nauru and PNG should be brought immediately to Australia (with their consent) so that we do not cause further harm to their health, and so that the medical care that they require can be provided.

Yours sincerely,

The undersigned members of the Australian healthcare community (see individual and organisational signatories below)

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