

18 March 2015

Coalition of peak health bodies calls for release of children from immigration detention

The Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) has joined with 14 other peak health bodies calling on the Government to immediately release all children and their families from immigration detention in Australia and Nauru. The Coalition's calls align with the recommendations of the Australian Human Rights Commission's recent *Forgotten Children* report.

The Coalition's joint statement on children in detention – released today – calls on the Government to implement the recommendations of the report, in particular:

- remove children and their families from detention centres on and off shore and release them into the Australian community, and
- urgently appoint an independent guardian for unaccompanied children seeking asylum in Australia.

The joint statement also highlights the need to appoint an independent panel of health professionals to provide advice and oversight of health and healthcare in detention facilities on and offshore.

“PHAA believes that in the wake of the Commission's findings urgent action is required to protect the innocent children who continue to suffer lifelong damage as a result of Australia's immigration detention policies. The report provided unprecedented first-hand evidence of the impact that prolonged immigration detention has on the mental and physical health of children. It also identified the impact of detention on the key developmental stages of children as infants, pre-schoolers, primary aged children and teenagers,” said Michael Moore, Chief Executive Officer of PHAA.

Mr Michael Smith, Co-Convenor of PHAA's Mental Health Special Interest Group, added: “According to the report, 34% of children detained in Australia and Christmas Island have a mental health disorder of such severity that they require psychiatric support and will continue to require ongoing psychosocial support, while the proportion in the general community is less than 2%. Disturbingly, the Commission believes the rate to be possibly even higher in Nauru. Children are reported to be self-harming in detention at very high rates, with a significant number of incidents of voluntary starvation involving children also observed. The Inquiry also found evidence that children have been exposed to unacceptable levels of assault, including sexual assault and violence in detention.”

“These are horrific findings and we're certain that Australians would be appalled and distressed that these shocking incidents of harm are happening to children in our care. The personal stories of horror and hardship experienced by children in the Commission's report are heartbreaking – and yet when these vulnerable children arrive on our shores from situations of protracted conflict seeking our help, we lock them up offshore and fail to protect them from further abuse. PHAA - and the 14 other peak health bodies - are calling on the Australian Government to heed the findings of the report and implement its recommendations as a matter of urgency,” said Mr Moore.

The joint statement is available on the PHAA website at www.phaa.net.au and there will be a related Twitter conversation under the hashtag #HealthOrgsUnite .

For further information/comment:

Michael Moore, Chief Executive Officer, PHAA

0417 249 731

Michael Smith, Co-Convenor, PHAA Mental Health Special Interest Group

0400 420 827