

ENDING OFFSHORE DETENTION OF ASYLUM SEEKERS – THE ROLE OF THE MEDICAL PROFESSION

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Background / Introduction: Leaked incident reports revealing numerous instances of physical, psychological and sexual violence amongst asylum seekers in Nauru has highlighted the continued trauma experienced by asylum seekers in offshore detention.¹ The medical profession has an important role in advocating on behalf of vulnerable groups such as asylum seekers facing serious health and social harms. This study aims to describe the current position of Australian physicians by integrating available data.

Methods: A narrative review of all publications from the Royal Australian College of Physicians (RACP), the peak professional organisation responsible for the training, education and representation of physicians and paediatricians in Australia, relating to asylum seekers and offshore detention was performed. Data was collected from media releases, position statements, policy papers and submissions to government inquiries from the RACP.^{2,3}

Results / Outcomes: The RACP has publicly campaigned for the end of offshore detention using an evidence-based approach highlighting the severe adverse mental and physical health impacts. This advocacy by the RACP and other organisations regarding this politically sensitive and controversial issue has played an important role in increasing the awareness, media interest and investigations that have contributed to growing public disapproval with offshore detention.^{4,5} Significant outcomes achieved in the past 18 months include the closure of the Manus Island detention facility and the ratification of a resettlement deal with the United States of America. Offshore detention has continued however, with 333 asylum seekers currently held within the Nauru detention centre as of January 2018.

Conclusions: The RACP provided an authoritative message to policymakers and the public regarding the unacceptable health effects for people held in offshore detention. This advocacy by the RACP and other organisations has played an important role in creating awareness of the significant health problems associated with offshore detention and fostering a shift in public opinion. Whilst some important outcomes have been achieved, ongoing pressure is required to drive a further change in public attitudes and achieve the RACP's goal of ending the practice of offshore detention and its consequent harmful effects.

References

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