

The Hon. Malcom Turnbull MP  
Prime Minister of Australia  
Parliament House Canberra ACT 2600

9 October 2015

## Dear Prime Minister

We are writing regarding the prolonged detention of asylum seekers, particularly children, in offshore processing centres on Nauru and Manus Island. This letter is in response to the International Health and Medical Services (IHMS) quarterly health report, released by the Department of Immigration and Border Protection under freedom of information on 1 September 2015.

The IHMS report, as referenced by the Guardian Australia on 17 September 2015<sup>1</sup>, paints an alarming picture regarding the mental health of asylum seekers being detained in offshore processing centres.

Figures from the IHMS report show that on average 23.7% of the population of the offshore processing centres score within the moderate-severe range on the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale. The report suggests that this "is likely to be due to a combination of factors including the relative time in detention, morbidities in the Transferee population which make them predisposed to heightened distress when faced with hopelessness, and apprehension about their future."<sup>2</sup>

Most alarming is the mental health of the children being held in these centres. The report shows that over 44% of children in offshore detention required the attention of a mental health nurse in the October – December 2014 period.

There is a sizeable body of evidence detailing the relationship between adverse events in childhood and negative psychological outcomes later in life. It is widely acknowledged that childhood adversity plays a causal role in mental health problems including anxiety and depression.<sup>3</sup>

When the debate was occurring around the release of the Human Rights Commission's report *The Forgotten Children: National Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention*<sup>4</sup>, you were quoted in the Sydney Morning Herald stating that the "bottom line is this: one child in detention is one child too many. Everyone is anguished by having children locked up in detention."<sup>5</sup>

We are sure you will agree that it is clear from both the IHMS report, and the report from the Human Rights Commission, the conditions inside detention centres are likely to cause ongoing harm to the individuals being detained. Taking action now would also be a step toward repairing Australia's international reputation at a time when it has been severely criticised for its treatment of children in detention.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2015/sep/17/extended-detention-worsening-depression-on-nauru-and-manus-island>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.border.gov.au/AccessandAccountability/Documents/02092015-fa-15040021.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Professor N. Procter - <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/Mr%20Aristotle%20and%20Prof%20Procter.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/asylum-seekers-and-refugees/publications/forgotten-children-national-inquiry-children>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/malcolm-turnbull-contradicts-tony-abbott-on-gillian-triggs-strategy-20150225-13o8lb.html>

In light of the IHMS report, and given your new position as Prime Minister for Australia, we the undersigned call on you to release all children and their families from the detention centres on Nauru and Manus Island. We also call on you to act now to make the changes to the living conditions and freedoms of people in detention that will reduce the current risks to their mental health and wellbeing.

Sincerely,

**Kim Ryan**, Chief Executive Officer, Australian College of Mental Health Nurses  
**Julian Grant**, President, Maternal Child and Family Health Nurses Australia  
**Lee Thomas**, Federal Secretary, Australian Nursing & Midwifery Federation  
**Glenys Wilkinson**, Chief Executive Officer, Australian Association of Social Workers  
**Kathleen McLaughlin**, Acting Chief Executive Officer, Australian College of Nursing  
**Christopher Cliffe**, Chief Executive Officer, CRANAplus  
**Hamza Vayani**, National Project Manager, Mental Health in Multicultural Australia  
**Michael Dudley**, Suicide Prevention Australia  
**Ingrid Ozols**, Managing Director, mentalhealth@work  
**Louise Newman**, Director, Centre for Women's Mental Health, The Royal Women's Hospital  
**Heather Gridley**, Manager - Public Interest, The Australian Psychological Society  
**Lyn English**, Consumer Co-Chair, National Mental Health Consumer and Carer Forum  
**Elida Meadows**, Carer Co-Chair, National Mental Health Consumer and Carer Forum  
**Michael Moore**, Chief Executive Officer, Public Health Association of Australia  
**Frank Quinlan**, Chief Executive Officer, Mental Health Australia  
**Arthur Papakotsias**, Chief Executive Officer, Neami National  
**Noel P Muller**, President, Queensland Voice for Mental Health Inc.  
**Phil Robinson**, Chair, Emerging Minds  
**Andrew C. Peters**, Chief Executive Officer, The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists  
**Alexis Hunt**, Chief Executive Officer, Australian Primary Health Care Nurses Association  
**Janine Mohamed**, Chief Executive Officer, Congress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nurses and Midwives  
**Patrick McGorry**, Executive Director, Orygen  
**Frances Kay-Lambkin**, Society for Mental Health Research  
**Christine Morgan**, Chief Executive Officer, The Butterfly Foundation

