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Re: **Senate Select Committee on the recent allegations relating to conditions and circumstances at the Regional Processing Centre in Nauru**

I am a consultant paediatrician with expertise in refugee child health, having headed a Refugee Clinic at a tertiary children's hospital for over 10 years. In December 2014, I was employed by the International Health & Medical Services to assess children on Nauru.

With special regard to safety of women and children, the living conditions are unsafe and put vulnerable women and children at considerable risk of assault. I visited the asylum seekers' living quarters. They live in tents; each family's tent adjoins the next. There is no privacy from neighbours and less from guards, who can enter tents unannounced any time. Only tents for children under 5 are air-conditioned. The interior of many other tents is mouldy. Tents are 30-120 metres from the nearest washing and toilet facilities. To go to the toilet at night involves crossing dark, open land, often under the gaze of large male guards. Many children and some mothers had nocturnal enuresis (bed-wetting at night) rather than run the gauntlet of a night-time toilet visit. Many women have insufficient sanitary towels and use clothes and material to soak up the blood.

When interviewing the [redacted] referred to me, she confided to me that she had been raped by a [redacted] when she went to the toilet at night. She said she had told Senator Hanson-Young but had not told the police because she feared repercussions and did not want her [redacted] to know. She told me that since the rape, one guard had offered her extra shower time in return for sexual favours (each person was restricted to two minutes a day because of water restrictions), and on another occasion a different guard offered marijuana in return for sexual favours. She wept uncontrollably for ten minutes when telling me her story, which I had no reason to doubt. I discussed the rape with senior IHMS medical colleagues and we arranged for the mother to see an IHMS psychologist to try to help her cope with the trauma.

In the short time I was on Nauru I was not referred any children with suspected child abuse, but the Moss enquiry was underway and IHMS and Save the Children staff would not discuss child protection issues. In my hospital practice I have had to help one child who was sexually abused while in immigration detention on Christmas Island. The living conditions on Nauru put children at high risk of suffering physical or sexual abuse. The guards have immense power over asylum seeker families.

The many children and parents I saw, almost all with stress-related health conditions, had all been in offshore detention on Christmas Island and Nauru for more than a year. Most staff members are sent home after 4-6 weeks to rest; they become exhausted and develop mental health problems if they stay longer. Yet asylum seekers are being detained indefinitely in conditions that can only be described as a prison camp. The people living in Nauru are not told when or even if they will be released. When they arrive they do not know their fate and more than a year later they still do not know their fate. Australian prisoners are tried and told their release date; anything else is unlawful. We treat people reaching our shores under a metaphorical white flag, begging for asylum, worse than we treat convicted criminals.

In Franz Kafka's book *The Trial*, a banker Josef K is arrested, prosecuted and persecuted by a remote, inaccessible authority for an unknown crime he has not committed. His powerlessness is terrifying. Asylum seekers who take boats to Australia have committed no crime. Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to which Australia is a signatory, says: *"Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution."* Even our National Anthem says: *"For those who've come across the seas we've boundless plains to share."* But the asylum seekers on Nauru feel as powerless as Josef K, imprisoned and persecuted by us for the non-crime of fleeing persecution at home. Powerless people may become depressed or may become violent. It is little wonder that there have been riots on Nauru and Manus. Asylum seekers are already prone to mental health problems from the traumas they have suffered at home and in flight. It is chilling to think we may be deliberately increasing the risk that fellow human beings will have long-term mental health problems.

To imprison anyone without trial contravenes international law. More importantly, it contravenes the moral code of any civilised or even semi-civilised country. When we hear a country imprisons people without trial, we think it must be a police state, or worse. The famous Polish author, poet and journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski wrote: *"Your culture will best reveal its depth, value and sense only when you see how it is reflected by other cultures, which can shed the best, most penetrating light on your own."* Italy treats asylum seekers with compassion, dignity and respect while attempting to persuade other countries to prevent boats leaving. Our treatment of asylum seekers, particularly children, repels the international community.

The human cost of our asylum seeker policy is enormous. But the economic cost is also astronomic: last year Australia spent over \$500,000 per person in detention on Nauru. In contrast, it costs only a few thousand dollars per person in community detention in Australia.

Politicians of all persuasions should stop mandatory detention now, in Australia and offshore. We must process asylum seekers' applications for refugee status in a timely way. Most importantly, we need to get in touch with our compassion for human beings in distress and find our humanity.



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