



The Royal Australasian
College of Physicians

Opinion – RACP President Professor Nicholas Talley

Child detention: end this shameful bipartisan policy

The report by the Australian Human Rights Commission, *The Forgotten Children*, provides overwhelming evidence once again of the terrible health impacts Australia's detention policies are having on children.

It's a grim read, replete with stories of children crying themselves to sleep at night, illustrated with children's drawings of bars, tears and upturned faces, and containing testimony from expert paediatricians that the physical, mental and emotional harm being done to children may in many cases be irreversible.

In short, it shows successive governments have clearly failed to uphold their duty of care towards an extremely vulnerable group of people that has no voice to defend itself, and in so doing have breached the United Nation's International Convention for the Rights of the Child.

Almost as sad as the report itself has been the response from the Federal Government, which has had the report since November but only tabled it at the last possible moment, in the closing hours of parliament on Tuesday, the day of its deadline.

Instead of engaging with the report's horrific content, the Government has attacked the Commission and its president, Professor Gillian Triggs, suggesting that in highlighting the suffering of these children she has engaged in some kind of 'partisan political stitch up', in the Prime Minister's words.

This response is deeply disappointing. The commission engaged some of Australia's most distinguished paediatricians to examine conditions in detention and the data relating to health impacts. 41 witnesses gave evidence, under oath, during five public hearings. Many of these experts are my colleagues, Fellows of The Royal Australasian College of Physicians. To suggest their professional medical opinions are part of some political hatchet job is simply shameful.

The government's response discounts an overwhelming consensus that holding children in detention is unacceptable, outlined in submissions made to the Inquiry by over two hundred organisations and individuals.

My own organisation provided evidence to the inquiry and I take great offense at any suggestion its evidence was influenced by partisanship. This is not about politics; it is about saving vulnerable children from the severe harm done to them in detention, which is proven and undisputable.

The facts – of children refusing to speak or eat, crying through the night unable to sleep, wetting their beds in fear – are indisputable and beyond politics.

Our opposition to holding children in detention has been sustained during Liberal and Labor Governments, as has this harmful policy, sadly.

Indeed, as Professor Triggs highlighted this week, detaining children is one of the few areas of political bipartisanship in recent years, with both sides complicit in this reprehensible policy.

As a doctor and a medical researcher, I have no doubt this report is robust. It draws on qualitative and quantitative research methods to reach evidence-based conclusions that highlight the devastating impact the policy of mandatory detention has on children and their families. Scientific rigour is not subject to partisan politics, and it shows ignorance to suggest otherwise.

Instead of attacking the Commission and its president with the tired lines it has been parroting in the months leading up to this report being tabled, the Abbott Government should take this opportunity to fully adopt the report's recommendations.

Once and for all, Australia's leaders must put a stop to the detention of children in immigration facilities.

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