There are many opportunities to provide care to this most vulnerable group. By Debra Thoms

Asylum seekers are amongst the most vulnerable of the world’s displaced, enduring long unknown journeys, often dealing with the effects of trauma, torture and poverty. In addressing these issues, it’s hard to disengage from the politics. As many seek asylum on Australian shores, most often whilst being held indefinitely in remote detention centres, issues arise surrounding their mental and physical well-being.

Of particular concern is the health of children. Past and current Australian governments seem determined to expand the capacity of off-shore detention, and the health and protection of children seeking asylum remains the responsibility of those governments. In the delivery of that care, nurses make up a large portion of the professionals who provide services to these children and their families.

In June, the Department of Parliamentary Services acknowledged that, whilst it is not ideal, the most recent figures showed 1326 children are now in community detention and 1731 remain in remote immigration detention. Australia’s Human Rights Commission found, “many children in detention have suffered from a range of mental health problems, including anxiety, bed-wetting, nightmares, emotional numbness, hopelessness, dissociation and suicidal ideation”. These children are protected under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Australia is a signatory. The country is therefore obligated to provide appropriate living standards and both mental and physical healthcare.

The provision of such care to asylum seekers on Nauru and on Manus Island, Papua New Guinea, is governed by the Heads of Agreement between the Commonwealth of Australia, represented by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC), and International Health and Medical Services (IHMS). The Australian Government outlines that health services provided should be transparent and of a “standard and range of healthcare that is best supported by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) and IHMS. The Australian Government provides expert advice to the Australian Bureau of Statistics and other federal agencies in the development and implementation of health policy. The Government is committed to ensuring that all members of the Australian community are able to access affordable, high-quality healthcare. The government is committed to ensuring that all members of the Australian community are able to access affordable, high-quality healthcare. The government is committed to ensuring that all members of the Australian community are able to access affordable, high-quality healthcare.

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