Asylum Seeker and Refugee Health important for preventing COVID-19 spread

The Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) is calling on the Government to protect the health of asylum seekers and refugees during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“We want the Government to provide asylum seekers and refugees with access to healthcare and to move people out of crowded detention facilities and into appropriate accommodation where social distancing can be maintained,” said Professor Dantas, Convenor of the International Health Special Interest Group of the PHAA.

Asylum seekers and refugees are a COVID19 high risk group with limited access to health services in Australia. These groups are unable to practice self-isolation and social distancing as they live in crowded conditions with shared sanitation facilities. Those living in detention facilities in Nauru and PNG face the additional burden of being detained in countries with poor health systems. Detention facilities and crowded accommodation do not allow for appropriate infection control.

There are 1,440 people in detention facilities in Australia of which 72 are women, 5 are children and 1,363 are men. There are another 388 people in offshore detention on Nauru (205) and PNG (183)

“An equitable and humane Public Health response that supports asylum seekers and refugees during the COVID-19 Pandemic is essential for their health and wellbeing, but it is also important to reduce risk to the wider community. Another important reason is to prevent detention facilities from becoming clusters for COVID-19 transmission, through detainees, staff, other service providers and visitors resulting in community spread.” said Professor Jaya Dantas.

Asylum seekers and refugees have minimal or no access to Medicare and may not be able to access appropriate information and health services because of poor health literacy, lack of interpreters, fear of arrest and costs.

“We want the Government to ensure that no one is at risk of arrest if they take a test for COVID-19,” said Professor Dantas.

In the last few days there have been protests by detainees at the Villawood Detention Centre in Sydney. It is critical that we do not forget these vulnerable groups who are at a greater risk of infection as it will also have an impact on pandemic control by placing a burden on the health system and wider community.

For further information/comment:
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