Dear Minister Hunt,

Re: Ensuring people seeking asylum, refugees and other vulnerable groups are included in COVID-19 health responses

We, the medical bodies below, write to you to ask you to urgently address the gaps in the current COVID-19 response that present a public health risk for Australia. We are specifically concerned with the lack of access to Medicare and the PBS during this pandemic for people seeking asylum living on bridging visas. Everyone needs to know they can safely access testing and treatment for COVID-19, and, as you know, there is a significant risk that people are neglecting other areas of their health during this crisis.

Access to Medicare and PBS

People seeking asylum who are living in the community without access to Medicare and basic financial support are some of those at greatest risk for COVID-19 and also those that cannot adhere to public health requirements like self-isolation. Unstable housing as a result of destitution impedes people’s ability to adequately self-isolate. Lack of access to the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme means many cannot afford to purchase vital medications. This can further compromise people’s general health and increase their need for hospital admission, adding further unnecessary pressure when the health system is experiencing increased demand due to COVID-19 and entering flu season. Without a Medicare card, people are facing significant obstacles to testing and treatment. If people’s visas are about to expire or have already expired, they may not present for COVID-19 testing because they fear facing immigration detention or other dire consequences. A Medicare card is the only universally-accepted, easy-to-understand identification that facilitates healthcare access for testing and treatment. The lengthy processing times for receiving or even renewing a Medicare card are also a problem, with some people told they must wait eight weeks to receive them. All people in Australia need prompt access to testing and related treatment, and people seeking asylum require urgent access to Medicare.

Urgent action required

COVID-19 does not discriminate on the basis of citizenship or visa status. We need to act to ensure the protection of all people currently living in Australia. This must include ensuring that everyone currently in Australia has access to medical testing, care and treatment, regardless of their citizenship or visa status. It will protect not only their health but our public health.
We are asking you as Minister for Health to ensure all people seeking asylum have access to Medicare and PBS for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic, and also have valid visas to ensure they maintain this access. This is a critical factor in Australia continuing to have low rates of infection as restrictions are slowly eased.

SIGNED BY

Australian Society for Infectious Diseases

The Royal Australasian College of Physicians