An Open Letter to the Minister for Immigration, Hon Peter Dutton, MP and members of parliament, from Australian doctors calling for a more humane approach to asylum seekers

Cc Hon Malcolm Turnbull, Prime Minister, Hon Bill Shorten, Leader of the Opposition,
Hon Shayne Neumann, Opposition spokesman for immigration,
Hon Richard Di Natale, Leader of the Greens, Senator Nick Xenophon

October 18 2016

Dear Mr Dutton and members of parliament,

We, the undersigned, are Australian doctors from a diverse range of fields of practice. We share common goals of duty and dedication to our patients and respect for all human life. We follow the Australian Medical Council Code of Conduct, which states that ‘good medical practice involves using your expertise and influence to protect and advance the health and wellbeing of individual patients, communities and populations’.

We are very concerned about Australia’s treatment of asylum seekers who come by boat, and urge you to institute more humane policies as a matter of urgency.

Indefinite mandatory detention of women, men and children is harmful to their physical and mental health. According to a submission from the Royal Children’s Hospital to the Human Rights Commission National Enquiry 2014 ‘detention denies children, adolescents and families the basic environmental requirements for their health, development and their wellbeing...There is evidence that all forms of detention adversely affect parenting, family functioning and the mental health of children, adolescents, parents and families. There are considerable child protection risks...’ Severity of mental illness is related to duration of detention. Despair, self-harm, violence, physical and sexual abuse are predictable and well documented. The most recent files relating to abuse and degrading treatment on Nauru only add to the abundant evidence already available.

Australia’s current policies constitute denial of basic human rights, and are in breach of international conventions, including the right to seek asylum and the right to be free from torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. They do not provide a fair, efficient and expeditious system for assessing refugee claims. The asylum seekers currently in detention, including those in offshore facilities, are under Australia’s care. Our control of these facilities has clearly failed to prevent abuse.

As doctors, we cannot condone or accept treatment of innocent and already traumatised people, particularly vulnerable women and children, which knowingly and deliberately causes harm.
We urge you to immediately close the camps on Nauru and Manus Island and bring all detainees to Australia for rapid processing and appropriate medical and psychological support. Those found to be refugees should be offered resettlement in Australia or other developed countries that offer to take them. All children currently in detention in Australia should be released with their families into the community, while their claims are rapidly processed.

We request that you urgently investigate the alleged abuses in our offshore detention facilities, including the role of the government and its agents, by supporting a high level independent enquiry, preferably a royal commission.

We urge you to work constructively with elected representatives from all sides of politics, regional governments and experts including UNHCR, to develop more humane policies that prevent desperate people attempting to reach Australia by boat.

Above all, we request a change in attitude towards vulnerable human beings seeking asylum to one of compassion and respect. This can be lead from the highest level of government.

Yours sincerely,

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Dr Shiraz, Emergency Resident, Epping, Victoria
Dr Sida Hou, GP, Crestmead, QLD
Dr Simon Judkins, Emergency physician, Melbourne, Vic
Dr Simon Rowe, Resident medical officer, Camperdown, NSW
Dr Siobhan Mullane, Paediatric Registrar, Parkville, Victoria
Dr Smita Samuelraj, GP, Kiara, WA
Dr Sneha Parghi, Obstetrics & gynaecology, Richmond, Vic
Dr Sonali de Sylva, Psychiatrist, Toowong, QLD
Dr Sonja Morgan, GP, Highgate Hill, QLD
Dr Stephen Douglas Joshua, Psychiatrist, Victoria
Dr Stephen Lambert, GP Registrar, Mackay, QLD
Dr Stephen Parnis, Emergency Medicine, Victoria
Mr Stephen Sharp, Final year medical student, Fitzroy, Victoria
Dr Steuart Rorke, Pathologist, Frankston, Victoria
Dr Steven Hurwitz, Paediatrics, Kogarah, NSW
Dr Steven Kao, Oncologist, Camperdown, NSW
Dr Stuart Anderson, GP, Maffra
Associate Professor Stuart Marshall, Anaesthetist, Melbourne, vic
Dr Sue Jacobs, Obstetrician and Gynaecologist, Newtown, NSW.
Dr Sujata Trivedi, GP, Kingston, Tasmania
Dr Suren Jayaweera, Endocrine and General Surgeon, Monash Health, St Vincent's Health, Vic
Dr Suresh Kumar, GP, Brisbane, Qld
Dr Suzanne King, GP, WA
Dr Tammy Bennetts, GP, Bunbury WA
Dr Tarini Fernando, Pathology Registrar, Box Hill, Vic
Associate Professor Terry Brown, Emergency Medicine, Hobart, Tasmania
Dr Thea Madeleine Bloom, Paediatric Advanced Trainee, Parkville, Victoria
Dr Theresa Naidoo, Paediatric Registrar, Hobart, Tasmania
Dr Thinn Thinn Khine, Adult medicine, 3195, Vic
Dr Tim Senior, GP, Tharawal Aboriginal Corporation, Airds, NSW
Dr Timothy Martin, Intern, Victoria
Dr Tina Thomas, Psychiatrist, Moonee Ponds, Echuca, Vic
Dr Tineke Fancourt, Anatomical pathologist, Heidelberg Victoria
Dr Trent Yarwood, Infectious Diseases Physician, Cairns, Qld
Associate Professor Trishe Leong, Pathologist, Heidelberg VIC
Mr Tristan Leech, General Surgeon, Frankston, Victoria
Dr Trupti Prasad, Paediatrician, Melbourne, Victoria
Dr Van Luu Le, GP trainee, St Leonards, NSW
Dr Vinita Rane, Sexual health physician, Clayton, Victoria
Dr Vivian Liang, Critical Care Resident, Victoria
Associate Professor Warren Ward, Psychiatrist, Herston Qld
Dr Wendy Sexton, GP / rural generalist locum, Perth, WA
Dr Winston Storer, Emergency Registrar, Flinders Medical Centre, SA
Dr Yasmin Whately, Anaesthetist, Heston, QLD
Dr Yoko Asakawa, Paediatric registrar, Fitzroy, Vic
Dr Young, Emergency specialist, Albany, WA
Dr Zain Hindawi, Psychiatrist, ACT
Dr Zara Mason, GP, Labrador, Qld
Dr Zara Watson, ENT Registrar, Camperdown, NSW
Dr Zeff Koutsogiannis, Emergency Physician, Heidelberg, Victoria
Dr Zina Jawad, GP, Laidley, QLD
Dr Zoe Burgman, GP, Kingscliff, NSW