

22 January 2015

Emily Ofner  
Policy Officer  
The Royal Australasian College of Physicians  
145 Macquarie Street, Sydney NSW, 2000  
Australia

By email: [racpconsult@racp.edu.au](mailto:racpconsult@racp.edu.au)  
[Emily.Ofner@racp.edu.au](mailto:Emily.Ofner@racp.edu.au)

### **RACP position statement and policy statement on refugee and asylum seeker health**

Dear Emily

Thank you for inviting the New Zealand Medical Association (NZMA) to provide feedback on the Royal Australasian College of Physicians' draft position and policy statements on refugee and asylum seeker health.

The NZMA is the country's largest voluntary pan-professional medical organisation with approximately 5,000 members. Our members come from all disciplines within the medical profession and include general practitioners, doctors-in-training, specialists, and medical students. The NZMA aims to provide leadership of the medical profession, and promote professional unity and values, and the health of New Zealanders.

We note that the College has developed the following four position statements to address key areas relating to refugee health: i) health assessments; ii) access to health care; iii) promoting long-term health in the community; iv) asylum seekers in held detention. We note that many aspects of the statements and associated recommendations have a much greater focus on the Australian rather than the New Zealand context, due to the complexity of the Australian policy environment and the relative stability of the New Zealand intake.

We congratulate the College on the work it is doing on refugee and asylum seeker health. Our feedback takes the form of general principles rather than specific responses to individual recommendations. The NZMA agrees that refugees and asylum seekers often have unique and complex health needs that require specific, comprehensive and consistent health care attention.

We welcome efforts to ensure that all refugees and asylum seekers have a thorough assessment of their physical and mental health on arrival and be linked with service providers.

We support the emphasis on ensuring equity in access to health care for this vulnerable group and the importance of language support, including professional interpreters. The NZMA believes these objectives are aligned with our Position Statement on Health Equity, which calls on the government to continue to urgently address the inequities in health status experienced by Māori, Pacific Island Peoples, refugees, migrants and other vulnerable groups.<sup>1</sup> We also welcome the Colleges' focus on addressing the social determinants of health and wellbeing in order to promote the long-term health of refugees in the community.

While held detention has not been an issue to date in New Zealand, we understand that domestic legislation allows for mandatory indefinite detention of asylum seekers, including children, if they are part of a 'mass arrival' by boat. The NZMA notes that the Australian Medical Association (AMA) has deemed that prolonged, indeterminate detention of asylum seekers in immigration centres violates basic human rights and contributes adversely to health.<sup>2</sup> While we do not currently have a formal position on the health care of asylum seekers and refugees, our Association is likely to share the views of the AMA with respect to the mandatory indefinite detention of asylum seekers. Furthermore, the Consensus Statement on the role of the doctor in New Zealand stipulates that as health advocates, doctors have a commitment to the health of all New Zealanders, but this exists alongside a professional responsibility for the health of individuals and communities throughout the world.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, we suggest the College may wish to refer to two New Zealand-specific resources that provide in-depth insight into the situation relating to the health care of refugee populations in New Zealand. These resources include the publication *Refugee Health Care: A handbook for health professionals*<sup>4</sup> and the website [www.refugeehealth.govt.nz](http://www.refugeehealth.govt.nz) developed by the Auckland Regional Public Health Service.

We hope that our feedback is helpful to the College and look forward to seeing the next iteration of these important statements.

Yours sincerely



Dr Mark Peterson  
NZMA Chair

---

<sup>1</sup> New Zealand Medical Association. Health Equity Position Statement, 2011. Available from [http://www.nzma.org.nz/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0016/1456/Health-equity-2011.pdf](http://www.nzma.org.nz/_data/assets/pdf_file/0016/1456/Health-equity-2011.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Australian Medical Association. Position Statement on Health Care of Asylum Seekers and Refugees, 2011. Available from <https://ama.com.au/position-statement/health-care-asylum-seekers-and-refugees-2011>

<sup>3</sup> New Zealand Medical Association. Consensus statement on the role of the doctor in New Zealand, November 2011. Available from [http://www.nzma.org.nz/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0006/16980/Consensus-statement-on-the-role-of-the-doctor-in-New-Zealand-November-2011.pdf](http://www.nzma.org.nz/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/16980/Consensus-statement-on-the-role-of-the-doctor-in-New-Zealand-November-2011.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Health. Refugee Health Care: A handbook for health professionals. Wellington 2012: Available from <http://www.health.govt.nz/system/files/documents/publications/refugee-health-care-a-handbook-for-health-professionalsv2.pdf>