As a 25-year-old medical student, most people wouldn’t question who I am beyond a conscientious, bright and happy person. Who I am, and all of my achievements up to now, has been because I’ve been brought up in a wonderfully supportive and protective family. Most importantly, my parents have worked hard to maintain stability in my life – food was always available, the doors to my home were always open and the opportunities to seek for my own fortunes were always present. Very few people though, know of the harrowing past my parents had to get us all here.

My parents were boat people. They had tried to escape the oppressive Communist rule in Vietnam 25 years ago. They were caught and put in jail. My mum was 3 months pregnant with me. They got served a 2-year sentence but my mum was let out early to give birth to me. My relatives had to pay out the government, in blocks of gold, to release my dying father. Little is talked about those events now but the happy ending is that my uncle eventually supported them over here, where they started life with little more than what was in a small rucksack. No doubt that from the day my parents stepped off their little Qantas plane up until now, they have always been thankful of the generous government that allowed them to restart their lives here, as difficult as it was.

And now, as I sit here, I wonder what happened to that generous government. What had been warm open arms have now changed to a tight iron grip that is our detention centres. My heart goes out to not only the families, but also the children kept in these centres. Not only are we violating the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention and the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, we are violating the innocence of a child by keeping them in our detention centres. There’s no arguing that the experiences these children go through in these centres will always be with them.

I currently volunteer with a medical student organization that aims to bring light onto the issue of refugee rights in Australia to my cohort. I’ve been to Villawood Detention Centre to visit the detainees there. That is no place for a child with dreams and hopes to grow up in. There is no stability there, nor is it a home for anyone. I highly doubt our other detention centres are much better. The longer we turn a blind eye to this and the longer we wait to take action, the greater the damage we do.

Sometimes I wonder if, had I been older or had my parents escaped later, I would’ve been placed in jail or a detention centre, like the children we’re currently locking up. Who would I have become? Perhaps never a doctor. So how many other future doctors, researchers, curers and carers are we locking up now? And for what? Do we truly believe that releasing these people and giving them a new life in Australia will cause them to revolt and upturn the Australian way of life, rather than be utterly thankful, as my parents are?