Please accept the following as a submission to the inquiry into children in immigration detention.

I am a final year student doctor with experience in treating children after detainment in immigration detention, a public health advocate, and a concerned member of the public. I submit that the Australian Government should release all children who are held in immigration detention centres, to live with their families in the Australian community while their refugee status is determined.

At the end of February 2014, there were 929 children “in immigration detention facilities and alternative places of detention” in Australia, and a further 177 children in offshore detention in Nauru. All children, regardless of background, should have the chance to be happy and healthy and get a good education. I firmly believe that this chance is being denied to children in Australian detention centres.

Refugees and asylum seekers may have been exposed to a range of conditions that may predispose them to poorer health, including a history of persecution and armed conflict, the threat of, or actual physical violence, and dislocation. This immense trauma is then compounded by often lengthy and indeterminate periods of detainment in refugee camps and detention facilities. By widespread accounts, these institutions expose children to depressed, anxious, hopeless and despairing adults, afforded little autonomy or dignity, amid crowded and grossly under-resourced settings; and lack the capacity to provide basic physical and mental health services. For this reason, I believe they are dangerous and troubling environments for any young person.

For those children who end up settling in Australia, the long-term damage is likely to affect other children they are in contact with, other adults, as well as propagating inter-generational trauma. For those who are returned to their country of origin, incarceration only adds to the trauma experienced during this early and vulnerable period in their lives.

In my relatively short time in the medical field, I have been involved in general practice consultations with children shortly following their detainment. I have seen a variety of highly concerning responses in these children, including withdrawal and social isolation, over-dependency, distrust and aggression, and even what appeared to be post-traumatic stress disorder in a child of only eight years.

I am disappointed that Australia is failing in this very basic duty to protect children. I implore the Australian Human Rights Commission to recognise that incarceration precipitates frank mental illness in this already highly vulnerable population. No person seeking asylum, let alone children and families, should suffer at the hands of punitive detention policies by the Australian Government, who are bound by international law to prevent exactly that.

Regards,

Erica Parker.