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Transcript: AMA Vice President Dr Stephen Parnis, ABC Radio PM, 12 October 2015

Subject: Children in detention

TIM PALMER: There's growing support for the doctors at Melbourne's Royal Children's Hospital, who are refusing to discharge refugee children back into detention.

Hundreds of medical staff at the hospital have urged the Federal Government to remove children from detention, saying the effect on their physical and mental health could last a lifetime.

Federal Liberal backbencher Russell Broadbent has backed their stance, as have the Greens and Victoria's Health Minister.

Kellie Lazzaro reports.

KELLIE LAZZARO: Nearly 1,000 doctors, nurses and staff at Melbourne's Royal Children's Hospital have taken the unprecedented stand against children being held in detention.

They're urging the Federal Government to remove all children from detention centres and say they'll refuse to discharge a child if it means they'll be returned to immigration detention.

The doctors' public stance has been viewed by some as a political move.

Victoria's Health Minister Jill Hennessy has given them her unqualified support.

JILL HENNESSY: Our doctors are making some very, very brave decisions by speaking publicly. They are not people that ordinarily like to engage in the wherewithal of the political debate. As their Minister, I'm saying I support them - end of story.

KELLIE LAZZARO: The doctors have also found an ally in the Federal Parliament in Russell Broadbent, the Liberal backbencher who's been a long time critic of Australia's treatment of asylum seekers

RUSSELL BROADBENT: Long term indefinite detention is not acceptable in this country, it always comes to this, I knew it would come to this, it's come to this again, of the Australian people standing up saying nope, not on, not in our country.

KELLIE LAZZARO: The Greens Leader, Senator Richard di Natale, says he too supports the doctors' public stance.

RICHARD DI NATALE: We are damaging a whole generation of children. These places are mental illness factories, and what we saw was the medical community come together to say they will not, in their name, accept any Government policy that continues to inflict that sort of trauma on young kids.

KELLIE LAZZARO: Senator di Natale, who worked as a GP before entering Parliament, says it's a dilemma faced by medical practitioners around the country.

RICHARD DI NATALE: We've got doctors right around the country saying: "Enough's enough. We are no longer going to do it."

KELLIE LAZZARO: Dr Barri Phatarfod is the co-founder and convenor of Doctors for Refugees and has visited the Villawood detention centre six times in the past year to talk with detainees about their health concerns.

She says it's entirely appropriate for doctors to take into account a person's living situation when deciding whether they can be discharged.

BARRI PHATRFOD: Family or social support, whether people have flights of stairs, access to medical equipment and treatment - doctors wouldn't send an Australian child back to a household where there was the possibility of sexual abuse, amongst all of the other allegations we've heard.

KELLIE LAZZARO: On Twitter today, leading human rights lawyer Julian Burnside said if any doctors or nurses are prosecuted for speaking up to protect refugee children, he will defend them free of charge.

The Doctors for Refugees group is seeking legal advice on whether a doctor who refuses to discharge a refugee patient could face disciplinary action under the Australian Border Force Act.

The Australian Medical Association Vice President Dr Stephen Parnis has spoken with medical staff at the Royal Children's Hospital today. He says they're concerned about legal repercussions, but are duty bound to put their patients' best interests first.

STEPHEN PARNIS: As individual doctors, they have felt extremely constrained in terms of allowing children to return to detention, knowing full well that the harms they presented with in the first place are going to continue.

They have sought to do the right thing, and that is to see a change in Federal Government policy and the way that care is administered by officers, and this has manifested in people seeking advice from colleagues; I've seen doctors cry over these sorts of issues, because it is such a contradiction to the ethics that we have.

KELLIE LAZZARO: Dr Parnis says the doctors are also concerned that the Department of Immigration may stop allowing refugee children to seek medical help.

STEPHEN PARNIS: It is opportune for the new Prime Minister to recognise that something is very wrong with our policy at the moment. This has nothing to do with stopping boats.

This is all about humane care and stopping abuse of children. Doctors will do the best that they can with the circumstances they have. We are not keen on any doctor willingly breaking the law, but our ethics are our first consideration, as are the people in front of us.

If we can't look after kids properly, then what are we doing?

KELLIE LAZZARO: Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has acknowledged the doctor's concerns during Question Time.

MALCOLM TURNBULL: Under the Labor government, the number of children in detention peaked at almost 2,000.

Under this Government, those numbers have been dramatically reduced.

TIM PALMER: The Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull ending Kellie Lazzaro's report.

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