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AMA calls on Northern Territory legislators and all jurisdictions to raise the age of criminal responsibility

The Australian Medical Association has called on the Northern Territory government and all Australian governments to stop putting children in jail.

The Northern Territory is set to pass legislation which will see the age of criminal responsibility in the Territory rise from 10-years-old to 12, however the AMA says the changes do not go far enough and the minimum age for incarceration should be 14 years old.

President of the AMA Professor Steve Robson said the Northern Territory law will still allow children in primary school and in their first year of high school to be placed in jails like the Don Dale Youth Detention Facility.

“The AMA urges Northern Territory legislators to listen to the experts and not turn their backs on this issue. The health advice is clear, kids aged 12 and 13 should not be held criminally responsible. The job will not be done until the minimum age is raised to 14 years,” Professor Robson said.

“Our position is informed by medical evidence — jail is no place for children. It offers limited rehabilitation opportunities and has serious adverse impacts on child development and mental and emotional wellbeing. There are alternatives.”

AMA Northern Territory President Associate Professor Robert Parker said the AMA was also calling on the Northern Territory Government to close the Don Dale Youth Detention Facility.

“AMA members are concerned about the lack of urgency shown by the Northern Territory Government to act on the recommendations from the royal commission and inquiry into the protection and detention of children in the Territory, which is now over five-years-old,” Dr Parker said.

“The AMA is very concerned by reports the Don Dale Detention Youth Detention Facility is expanding accommodation and that the number of young people detained is on the rise, as well as recent reports of staff shortages at the centre.

“We remain very concerned about children detained in the facility. A number of these children are subjected to extended periods of isolation in inadequate conditions.

“There is disproportionate representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children detained in the Northern Territory, and we urge the Territory Government to support alternatives to prison.”

“There are models around the country which are community-led, culturally appropriate programs which are helping kids stay healthy, grow and thrive, all the while breaking down the cycle of incarceration.”

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