

Australian Medical Association Limited

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Transcript: AMA President, Dr Michael Gannon, with Sarah Whyte, ABC Radio, *The World Today*, Monday 20 November 2017

Topics: Health of asylum seekers

LINDA MOTTRAM: The 421 men remaining in the now closed Manus Island Detention Centre say they are surviving on bananas, coconuts, and rain water. It's been nearly three weeks since the Detention Centre was officially closed, and services and food supplies were cut off. The Australian Medical Association is claiming that the Immigration Department won't provide medical updates on the men's' condition. Sarah Whyte reports.

SARAH WHYTE: Sudanese refugee, Abdul Aziz Adam, has been refusing to leave the Manus Island detention centre for nearly three weeks.

ABDUL AZIZ ADAM: They are determined to stay inside the Detention Centre, even if there is nothing going to happen to them. And all of them, they are saying in one word that we are happy to die in here rather than going outside, because no-one will guarantee our safety.

SARAH WHYTE: The language he's been using has become increasingly desperate, as the conditions the remaining men are living in continue to deteriorate.

ABDUL AZIZ ADAM: We are really sick and tired of being in prison. For how long we're going to spend our lives in prison? So we need people to understand, this is [indistinct].

SARAH WHYTE: They are surviving on rations as part of their ongoing protest.

ABDUL AZIZ ADAM: We are having a shortage of food that we are getting supplied by some of the locals, like coconuts and bananas, and also we are getting some small amount of food that at least it will keep us to survive. Like, we are having one meal a day, and the rest of the day we just try to boil the water and a little bit of salt, sugar, just to avoid ourselves from dehydrating.

SARAH WHYTE: Until a few months ago, Dr Michael Gannon, the President of the Australian Medical Association, says he had a direct line to the Chief Medical Officer of the Immigration Department, Dr John Brayley. But that's now changed, and getting verified information about the men's health has proven virtually impossible.

MICHAEL GANNON: What we've been hearing for a long time now is unverifiable reports from refugee advocates. More recently I've been hearing more direct reports from credible clinicians who one way or another have found their way to view the conditions that the men on Manus are under. At various times we've been given reassurances by Government, by the Department of Immigration and Border Protection. Previously, we had a situation where I had a direct line of communication with Dr John Brayley, the Chief Medical Officer of the Department of Immigration and Border Protection. He's no longer there, and we no longer have that ability to hear exactly what's going on.

We're calling for transparency so that the health care which has been delivered to these men in the name of the Australian people reaches the standards they would expect.

SARAH WHYTE: How long have you been cut off from communication by the Department?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, certainly, I've written to Minister Dutton twice in the past fortnight expressing concerns. We met as a Federal Council on the weekend and voted unanimously to call very specifically for a delegation of doctors to go and make their own independent assessment of the healthcare facilities available to these men. I'm yet to receive a response from Minister Dutton in regard to the letters; I'm sure he's seen some of the media reports based on our determinations over the weekend. I would welcome the opportunity to speak to him about it. I will certainly be taking the issue up with Minister Hunt in coming days.

SARAH WHYTE: The AMA is calling for an independent medical team to go and assess the men on the island.

MICHAEL GANNON: Our statement specifically calls for a team containing a psychiatrist, containing a GP, containing an infectious diseases specialist, and a public health physician to independently verify exactly what's going on on Manus at the moment.

SARAH WHYTE: Their situation has also been attracting international attention. During the weekend, the *New York Times* ran a feature on the future of the centre, while former New Zealand Prime Minister, Helen Clark, urged Australia to show some humanity.

New Zealand has offered to accept 150 of the men, but Australia has declined the offer, saying the priority was an existing refugee swap deal negotiated with former US president Barack Obama last year. The Immigration Department has continually maintained the new facilities for the men are ready.

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