

Review

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Australian health policy on access to medical care for refugees and asylum seekers

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Published: 09 October 2005

Received: 18 April 2005

Australia and New Zealand Health Policy 2005, **2**:23 doi:10.1186/1743-8462-2-23

Accepted: 09 October 2005

This article is available from: <http://www.anzhealthpolicy.com/content/2/1/23>

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Abstract

Since the tightening of Australian policy for protection visa applicants began in the 1990s, access to health care has been increasingly restricted to asylum seekers on a range of different visa types. This paper summarises those legislative changes and discusses their implications for health policy relating to refugees and asylum seekers in Australia. Of particular concern are asylum seekers on Bridging Visas with no work rights and no access to Medicare. The paper examines several key questions: What is the current state of play, in terms of health screening and medical care policies, for asylum seekers and refugees? Relatedly, how has current policy changed from that of the past? How does Australia compare with other countries in relation to health policy for asylum seekers and refugees? These questions are addressed with the aim of providing a clear description of the current situation concerning Australian health policy on access to medical care for asylum seekers and refugees. Issues concerning lack of access to appropriate health care and related services are raised, ethical and practical issues are explored, and current policy gaps are investigated.

Introduction

Australian health care policy regarding entitlements to medical care for refugees and asylum seekers is complex. On the one hand, health care policy for refugees entering Australia on the offshore humanitarian program is comprehensive, entitling refugees to Medicare, early health assessment, specialised torture and trauma services, and access to the same services as other Australians. On the other hand, health care policy for refugees and asylum seekers who have entered Australia in an unauthorised manner, and who are on a range of visa types, is fragmented. About 40% of asylum seekers living in the community have no rights to access medical care [1].

Health policy for refugee and asylum seekers is directly tied to immigration policy and visa types and this in turn

is a complex and rapidly changing field of play. In this paper, we review current health care policies for refugees and asylum seekers in Australia with a focus on those areas of policy gaps that result in a lack of access to medical and health care for some, and less optimal access to care for others. We begin by briefly discussing the definitions of who is deemed to be a refugee and who is deemed to be an asylum seeker, for health care policies vary within and between these two categories accordingly. Second, we describe in some detail, the current health policy for asylum seekers and refugees within Australia's *onshore* program compared to health policy for refugees who have come to Australia through the *offshore* program. Third, we provide a broad comparison of Australian health care policies for refugees and asylum seekers to those of the United Kingdom, Canada and New Zealand, countries