

**To Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Hon Marise Payne**  
**CC: Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Hon Penny Wong**  
**Prime Minister of Australia, the Hon Scott Morrison**  
**Leader of the Opposition, the Hon Anthony Albanese**

16 December 2019

Dear Minister,

RE: MEDICAL EMERGENCY – MR JULIAN ASSANGE

We, the undersigned medical doctors, wrote to the UK Home Secretary on 22 November 2019, and to the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice on 4 December 2019, expressing our serious and unanimous concerns that an Australian citizen, Mr Julian Assange, is at risk of death due to the conditions of his detention in a UK prison.

Our open letter received worldwide media coverage and we received letters of support from doctors and others around the world. Now, having received no response from the UK Government, we call upon you to intervene as a matter of urgency. As Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs, you have an undeniable legal obligation to protect your citizen against the abuse of his fundamental human rights, stemming from US efforts to extradite Mr Assange for journalism and publishing that exposed US war crimes.

The medical imperative to protect Australian citizen Julian Assange cannot be overstated. Our letters to the UK Government have warned of serious consequences if Mr Assange is not transferred immediately from Belmarsh Prison to an appropriate hospital setting, where he can be assessed and treated by a suitably constituted specialist medical team. Mr Assange requires assessment and treatment in an environment that, unlike Belmarsh prison, does not further destabilise his complex and precarious physical and mental state of health.

On 22 November 2019, we warned the UK Home Secretary that if such a transfer were not to take place immediately, there was a real possibility that Mr Assange would die in a UK prison. That assessment of risk was based on publicly available information dating from 2015, provided by medical experts and leading authorities in human rights and international law.

You will recall that the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention concluded in December 2015 that Mr Assange was being arbitrarily detained by the governments of the UK and Sweden. Crucially, it was made clear at the time that any continued arbitrary detention of Mr Assange would constitute torture. Medical experts have repeatedly advised the UK Government of potentially catastrophic consequences should it fail to facilitate adequate medical care for Mr Assange. As our letters of 22 November 2019 and 4 December 2019 outline, such consequences,

including death, would be eminently foreseeable and attributable to the actions and inactions of the UK Government.

On 9 May 2019, UN Special Rapporteur on Torture Professor Nils Melzer interviewed Mr Assange at Belmarsh Prison, accompanied by a medical team. On 31 May 2019, Mr Melzer published his report and condemned the “collective persecution” of Mr Assange by the UK, Swedish, Ecuadorian and US governments. “Mr. Assange’s health has been seriously affected by the extremely hostile and arbitrary environment he has been exposed to for many years,” the expert warned. “Most importantly, in addition to physical ailments, Mr. Assange showed all symptoms typical for prolonged exposure to psychological torture, including extreme stress, chronic anxiety and intense psychological trauma.

“The evidence is overwhelming and clear,” the UN Special Rapporteur stated. “Mr. Assange has been deliberately exposed, for a period of several years, to progressively severe forms of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, the cumulative effects of which can only be described as psychological torture.”

On 1 November 2019, Professor Melzer was forced to intervene once more: “What we have seen from the UK Government is outright contempt for Mr Assange’s rights and integrity... Despite the medical urgency of my appeal, and the seriousness of the alleged violations, the UK has not undertaken any measures of investigation, prevention and redress required under international law.” He concluded: “Unless the UK urgently changes course and alleviates his inhumane situation, Mr Assange’s continued exposure to arbitrariness and abuse may soon end up costing his life.”

These are extraordinary and unprecedented statements by the world’s foremost authority on torture. The Australian government has shamefully been complicit by its refusal to act, over many years. Should Mr Assange die in a British prison, people will want to know what you, Minister, did to prevent his death.

Lest there be any misapprehension about the reality of the medical risks facing Mr Assange, important underlying medical facts are outlined in the Addendum to this letter. These facts render Mr Assange’s continued detention in Belmarsh Prison medically reckless at best and deliberately harmful at worst.

We therefore urge you to insist upon the immediate transfer of Mr Assange from Belmarsh Prison to an Australian university teaching hospital, on urgent medical grounds, so that he can receive the assessment and treatment that he requires. We are aware of statements by Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison that Mr Assange is “not going to be given any special treatment” and that Australia “is unable to intervene in Mr Assange’s legal proceedings”. However, the most fundamental human rights of an Australian citizen are being denied by the British government.

We demand that you exercise your diplomatic and legal powers to defend the rights of Mr Assange, as you have done previously for other Australian citizens detained abroad, including Melinda Taylor, James Ricketson, David Hicks and Peter Greste.

Further, Mr Assange must not face extradition proceedings for which he may well be medically unfit. At the case management hearing on 21 October 2019, Mr Assange struggled to answer basic questions regarding his name and date of birth, a potentially ominous sign with respect to his cognitive functioning and his state of health.

That we, as doctors, feel ethically compelled to hold governments to account on medical grounds speaks volumes about the gravity of the medical, ethical and human rights travesties that are taking place. It is an extremely serious matter for an Australian citizen's survival to be endangered by a foreign government obstructing his human right to health. It is an even more serious matter for that citizen's own government to refuse to intervene, against historical precedent and numerous converging lines of medical advice.

We are reliably advised that it is a well-established principle of international law—and of Australian law recognised by its own courts—that if a country's citizens face improper treatment, persecution, and human rights violations, they may be the subject of diplomatic action, at that sovereign power's discretion, to protect its citizens abroad. The Australian government must exercise that discretion and request from Britain the safe passage of Mr Assange to Australia, to protect Mr Assange and the rights of all Australian citizens.

We hope that this letter has helped to clarify the reality and urgency of the medical crisis facing your citizen, Mr Assange. We urge you to negotiate Julian Assange's safe passage from Belmarsh Prison to an appropriate hospital setting in Australia, before it is too late.

As the present matter is of inherent public interest, copies of this open letter will be distributed to media outlets worldwide.

Yours faithfully,

Signed:

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Open letter signatories as listed: <https://medium.com/@doctors4assange/concerns-of-medical-doctors-about-the-plight-of-mr-julian-assange-ffb09a5dd588>