

Australian
Drug Law Reform
Foundation

3 April 2020

Media Release

**RETIRED PHYSICIAN ADVISES GOVERNMENT: “CLOSE
DETENTION CENTRES AND PRISONS NOW - OR RISK FLOODING
OUR HOSPITALS IN A FORTNIGHT”**

Emeritus Consultant at Sydney’s St Vincent’s Hospital, Dr Alex Wodak AM, today called for the Commonwealth Government to immediately close all immigration detention centres and remove non-violent inmates from prisons across the country – or risk a major public health crisis of COVID-19.

Against ferocious opposition in the 1980s, Dr Wodak and colleagues strongly advocated for needle and syringe programs and other harm reduction measures to reduce HIV spreading among and from people who were injecting drugs. In 1986, Dr Wodak and his colleagues resorted to civil disobedience to speed up the Government’s response. Australia ended up having an extremely pragmatic and effective response to HIV, regarded as one of the ‘world’s leading responses to the epidemic of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s.

“This is simple mathematics”, Dr Wodak said.

“Judging by other countries, ventilators could soon reach capacity at our major public hospitals.

“An outbreak of COVID-19 is many, many times more likely in a detention centre or prison than in the general population.

“We cannot afford an outbreak – we owe these people a duty of care.

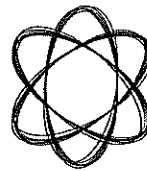
“In detention you have overcrowding, outdated facilities, lack of readily available hand sanitisers, and a population prone to chronic conditions such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease and asthma.

“Detainees in particular share common areas, laundries and areas where food is consumed.

“An outbreak is inevitable.

“This is a disaster that threatens to break the back of our struggling health system – and unnecessarily put lives at risk,” Dr Wodak said.

Dr Wodak called for an immediate, high level meeting between the Prime Minister, Department of Home Affairs and State Ministers for Corrective Services with a view to facilitating the speedy transfer for detainees and inmates from these centres to the community.



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“The expert advice is clear – these centres threaten to divert the scarce resources of our hospital system and imperil the whole community,” Dr Wodak said.

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