



Australian doctors condemn “horrific” treatment of children in juvenile detention

Paul Smith

Doctors in Australia have condemned the treatment of children in juvenile detention after film footage showing detainees being tear gassed, hooded, and stripped naked was broadcast on national television.

The country’s prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull, has ordered a royal commission into the treatment of young people in detention across the Northern Territory after the footage was shown by the Australian Broadcast Corporation on 25 July.

Leading doctors condemned the behaviour and warned of the potential psychological and physical harms faced by children in detention.

The footage was taken at the Don Dale Youth Detention Centre in Darwin in August 2014.

One clip showed guards laughing and calling one 14 year old inmate a “fucking idiot” following an attempted escape.

“I’ll pulverise the little fucker, grab the fucking gas, and fucking gas them through,” another guard added.

The footage then showed the child and five other teenagers who were locked inside their cells being tear gassed at close range.

One boy is left in his cell for around eight minutes lying face down on the floor with his hands behind his back, before being handcuffed and dragged out of his cell by prison officers wearing gas masks.

The 14 year old was later shackled and forced to wear a spit hood after being illegally moved—due to his age—to an adult prison.

In the run up to the tear gassing, the six youths had been kept in isolation for between 15 and 17 days in concrete cells with no running water and no natural light at Don Dale’s Behaviour Management Unit.

They had been confined to their cells for at least 22 hours each day.

The teenagers’ treatment has been described as torture in the Australian media, with some commentators quoting the United Nations special rapporteur on torture, Juan Mendez. In 2013 Mendez said that the effect of prolonged isolation on a child’s mental health was so severe that countries should introduce “an absolute ban” on solitary confinement and seclusion of any duration for children.

Despite the political fallout in Australia, the full details of the abuse and the conditions at the Don Dale centre had been in the public domain for almost two years.

A report by the Northern Territory’s office of the children’s commission was published in August 2015 documenting the use of isolation, spit hoods, and tear gas on the youths.

Michael Gannon, president of the Australian Medical Association (AMA), condemned the abuse.

“The AMA has raised concerns over many years based on reports from doctors and other health professionals . . . about the poor condition and treatment of people in detention in the territory, especially children—very often indigenous teenagers,” he said.

The teenagers who were tear gassed were originally placed in seclusion under provisions in the territory’s Youth Justice Act. The act allowed them to be detained for up to 24 hours in isolation “for the good order or security of the detention centre.”

The time period could be extended to no more than 72 hours on the authority of the commissioner of correctional services.

But Howard Bath, former children’s commissioner for the Northern Territory who investigated the centre in the days after the tear gas incident, said that detention staff simply requested a further 72 hours of seclusion when the time limit expired.

“The [children’s] isolation was just allowed to roll on and on . . . It seems there was no paperwork involved either,” Bath told *The BMJ*.

The Youth Justice Act also sanctioned the use of spit hoods, cable ties, and mechanical restraint chairs on children in detention in emergency situations.

Bath said the “closed system” of youth detention in the territory needed to be broken open, with proper medical oversight of the potential psychological and physical harms faced by inmates.

“There are certain things like physical restraint where there should be a medical check whenever it is used. The use of the tear gas should trigger a medical review.”

He added, “All the [behavioural management techniques used] were horrific.

“The hooding creates a horrible feeling when you see it. But ultimately the worst thing is kids being put in isolation in cells for extended periods.”

Calling for solitary confinement of children in detention to be banned, he said, “It is just unconscionable given all the warnings, given the UN precepts about harm that can be done. “Isolation is the worst thing happening to these kids,” he said.