

Asylum Seekers

Asylum seekers are people who apply for recognition as a refugee because they fear for their lives or risk being persecuted in their own country, and cannot safely return there. Not every asylum seeker will ultimately be recognised as a refugee, but every refugee was initially a person seeking asylum somewhere in the world.

Asylum seekers can arrive in Australia by boat or by plane. Some will arrive without a visa, while others may have arrived with a valid visa, such as a tourist or student visa, and then seek asylum. The manner and date of arrival to Australia will determine living arrangements and service eligibility of asylum seekers.

Asylum seekers may be living:

- In Immigration Detention Centers on the mainland
- In “offshore” centres (Nauru or Manus Is)
- In the community which includes:
 - Community Detention (a form of partial detention)
 - People released from detention on a Bridging Visa
 - People who arrived with a visa and live in the community on a Bridging Visa
 - People who had an initial (or later) claim rejected and are in the review process.

Some asylum seekers may have been through a number of these categories, each with a different system for health care provision. Additionally, asylum seeker policy is quite fluid and can be difficult to navigate for both service providers and asylum seekers. Please see websites over page for current information.

Health screening for asylum seekers in the community

The Australian Government requires all applicants for a permanent visa, including asylum seekers, to undergo a Health Check, which is performed by BUPA under contract from the Australian Government Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP), and includes a chest x-ray for those 11 years of age or older, and tests for HIV, hepatitis B and syphilis if 15 years of age or older. Other tests may be ordered as required.



NSW Refugee
Health Service

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Main health concerns

Like persons already classified as refugees, asylum seekers fleeing persecution and human rights abuses may have suffered psychological trauma, deprivation, torture and/or poor access to health care. People will have likely experienced significant psychological trauma and hardships in their journey to seek asylum.

Health problems commonly identified amongst community-based asylum seekers include:

- psychological disorders (eg depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder)
- musculo-skeletal problems (eg result of injury or torture)
- gastro-intestinal disorders
- hypertension & heart disease
- women’s health issues
- dental problems

Ongoing stressors whilst awaiting the outcome of their claim for asylum include fear of being returned to their country of origin, unemployment, limited English language skills, lack of money, separation from family, and isolation. Asylum seekers may also be fearful of using government services.

Be prepared for fragmented information as a result of anxiety, trauma or lack of trust.

Access to health services

Immigration Detention Centres

Offshore – asylum seekers who arrived by boat without a valid visa after 31 December 2013 are subject to transfer to Nauru and Manus Island. Healthcare is provided by International Health & Medical Services (IHMS), contracted by the Department of Immigration and Border Security (DIBP). <http://www.ihms.com.au/>

Onshore - Health care in Detention Centres is also managed by IHMS. Primary Health care is provided on site.

People in Community Detention

IHMS also manages the health care for people in Community Detention. They maintain a network of health providers including GPs, pharmacists, allied health providers (optometrists), specialists, psychologists, dentists and diagnostics.

Clients are allocated to a GP and a pharmacy, and will have an IHMS client ID card. Outside of GP visits, all health care must be approved by IHMS prior to the service. GPs can request additional health information from IHMS's Community Detention Assistance Desk (1800 689 295)

People residing in the community

Access to health care for people in the community can be variable depending on type of visa and their stage in the asylum application process. (E.Spike et al 2011)

Many asylum seekers will have access to Medicare. Others may have an expired card in the process of renewal. Some will not have access to Medicare at all and need the support of services such as Red Cross and Settlement Services International (SSI) to assist in accessing health care services through the Status Resolution Support Service (SRSS).

Asylum Seekers without Medicare

There is a recently updated NSW Health Policy (PD2016_055) "Medicare Ineligible and Reciprocal Health Agreement, Classification and Charging" http://www1.health.nsw.gov.au/pds/ActivePDSDocuments/PD2016_055.pdf

This policy guides health care providers and services for a wide range of patients without Medicare. The intention of this policy however, is to ensure asylum seekers have reasonable access to public health services. These include (but not limited to):

- emergency care and admission for acute medical and surgical conditions
- some elective surgery
- ambulatory and outpatient
- maternity services
- mental health services

When making referrals to a public health service, ensure that the patient & the staff of the relevant service are aware if a fee waiver applies.

Access to private health services

Asylum seekers have very limited access to private health services such as physiotherapy and specialists, even if they have Medicare, due to financial constraints. Asylum seekers are ineligible for a Health Care Card so cannot access subsidised medications.

If needed, consider referring to public outpatient clinics for specialist review, or for allied health care. Asylum seekers are unlikely to be able to afford private pathology, x-ray or medication costs.

Health Services that assist asylum seekers

- NSW Refugee Health Service: our GP clinics do not require Medicare cards. However, referral options for those without Medicare are limited. <http://www.swslhd.nsw.gov.au/refugee/>
- Asylum Seekers Centre: provides a range of medical and dental services; located in Newtown <https://asylumseekerscentre.org.au>
- There are certain GPs and health services that see people without Medicare (eg. STARTTS, chest clinics, sexual health clinics).

Relevant services for asylum seekers

Asylum Seekers Centre	9361 5606
Australian Red Cross	9229 4266
House of Welcome	9727 9290
NSW Refugee Health Service	8778 0770
STARTTS	9794 1900
Refugee Advice & Casework Service	9114 1794

Useful Websites

The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne

http://www.rch.org.au/immigranthealth/clinical/Asylum_seekers/

Refugee Council of Australia

<http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/publications/recent-changes-australian-refugee-policy/>

Department of Immigration and Border Protection

<https://www.border.gov.au/Trav/Refu>

Status Resolution Support Service (SRSS)

<https://www.border.gov.au/Trav/Refu/Illegal-maritime-arrivals/status-resolution-support-services-programme-srss>

Contact RHS if you would like to join a register of doctors and dentists who provide occasional *pro bono* services to asylum seekers OR contact Red Cross ASAS if you would like to register to provide (paid) services to asylum seekers.

References:

Spike eta (2011) Access to primary health care services by community-based asylum seekers *Med J Aust*; 195(4): 188-191