

The Australian government's Community Care pilot program is investigated and found wanting

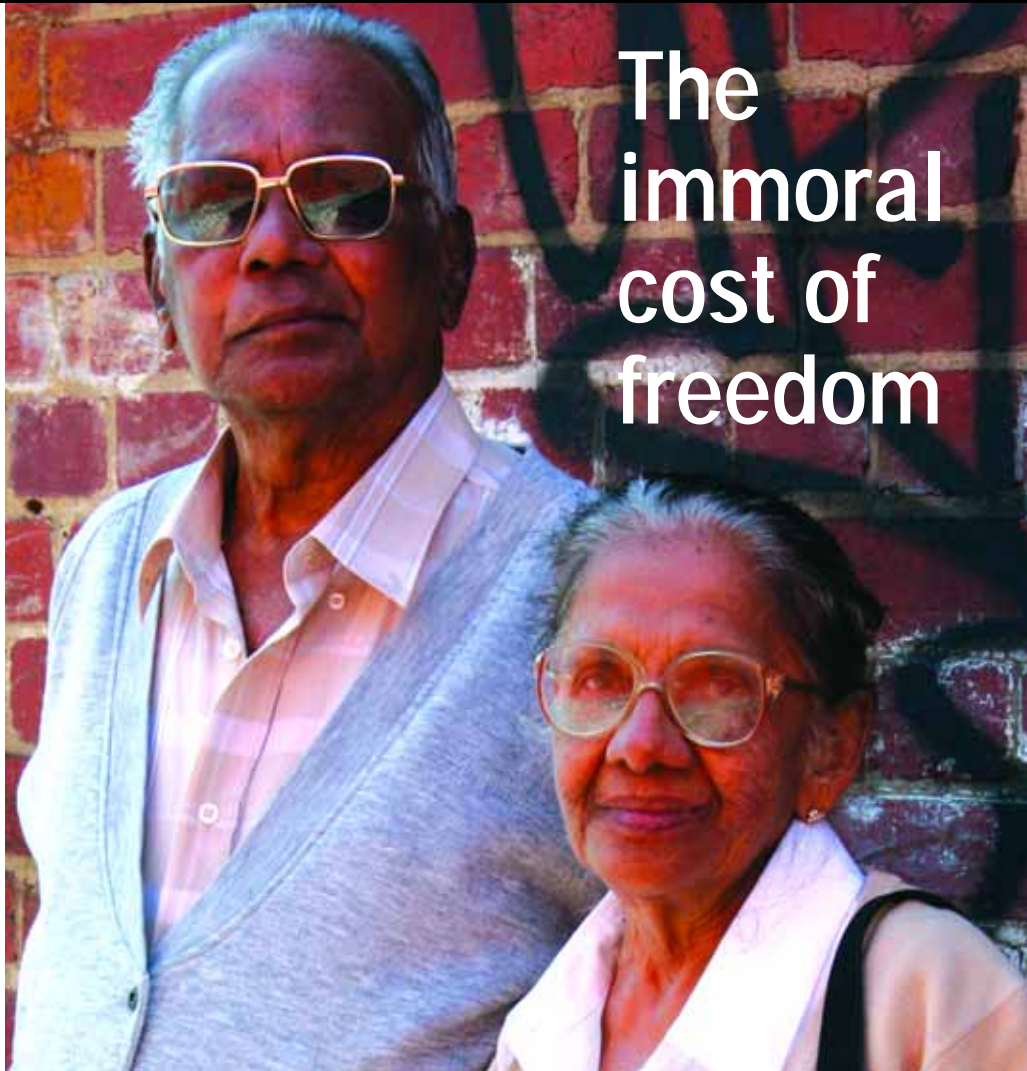
This is the story of the fragile lives of the Josephs, 83 and 81 years of age, who have spent the last ten difficult years trapped in an immigration system that has refused them crucial, basic medical care. Their story reveals the vulnerability of people with health problems and mental illness who remain at the mercy of a faceless immigration bureaucracy.

Fredrick and Ruth Joseph arrived in Australia ten years ago seeking respite from the significant religious and racial prejudice that they had experienced as Christians and Tamils in Sri Lanka – a country torn apart by a long-standing civil war. They came to join their Australian children and grandchildren.

Fredrick began having serious heart problems and underwent bypass surgery, which made it extremely difficult for him, with ailing health, to return to Sri Lanka.

A year later, the couple applied for protection visas, an action that brought them face to face with a confusing and stressful immigration process. This forced them through inconsistent proceedings in an ineffectual system where one federal court judge's assertion that they 'have strong claims to remain in this country on humanitarian grounds' held no sway over their immigration outcome.

During this time, as is the case with most asylum seekers awaiting the resolution of their applications, the Josephs were issued by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) with a Bridging Visa E – a visa which denies most asylum



The immoral cost of freedom

Fredrick and Ruth Joseph's hopes fade as they are trapped in an immigration quagmire.

seekers rights to work and access to Medicare or any form of welfare support, including perversely asylum seekers who have applied for asylum on psychological or medical grounds. Ruth and Fredrick have some family support to help financially, as carers, and to house them.

But for a significant number of asylum seekers there is no support at all. Others

have to rely entirely on the support of charities and community groups.

The Josephs receive pro bono critical care from the ASRC's Health program for Ruth's problems with heart disease, hypertension and osteoporosis, and some of Fredrick's life-threatening problems with cardiomyopathy, poorly controlled diabetes and his history of heart failure.

The Asylum Seeker Resource Centre is Australia's largest asylum seeker aid, health and advocacy organisation.

It is a community funded, independent, registered charity, working at the coalface with the most vulnerable and at risk asylum seekers.



The new premises will provide the Centre with greater opportunities to continue its charter of providing the highest quality support and aid services for asylum seekers. There will be an entire floor dedicated to the provision of educational, aid, social and recreation services for asylum seekers. There will be spaces dedicated to mothers and their babies, kitchen facilities with an oven, a larger foodbank area with a self-service section, in-take rooms for confidential meetings with clients and expanded ESL classrooms and computer labs for asylum seekers.

The new location has accessible and private outdoor spaces including a small garden which will provide a safe and peaceful, low stress environment for the asylum seekers and dedicated staff and volunteers alike.

Live like an asylum seeker for a week, June 17 - 24

Visit: www.asrc.org.au and download the brochure for more information

Take up our challenge

Imagine being an asylum seeker in Australia

... with no right to work or to claim Centrelink benefits, your life is most likely one of abject poverty, maybe you live in an overcrowded hostel or crash on a friend's couch or worse, sleep rough.

With no income to buy food you rely on charity food parcels – rice, tinned tuna, chickpeas, fruit and vegetables – if you're lucky. Everyday items such as toilet paper and soap are luxuries. You can't buy clothes, toys or school books for your children.

If you have an accident, get sick, or are pregnant, you have no access to health services. A couple of donated Met tickets a week are your only hope of transport. Without a job or money you have little to fill your days.

You are living in a new and unfamiliar culture far from family and friends. If you don't have a good grasp of English it is even harder to connect with people and seek help. **How would you cope? Find out by taking up our challenge.**

Live like an asylum seeker for a week

Visit: www.asrc.org.au and download the brochure for more information

ASRC GLOBAL GOURMET FAIR JUNE 24



The immoral cost of freedom cont'd

Denying basic human rights to so many individuals appears to be the government's deliberate policy of destitution. Head of the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, Kon Karapanagiotidis, explains how these policies 'damage people – they force them into poverty and isolation, drive them to despair and self-harm and cause or contribute to their poor physical health'.

While trapped in the lengthy immigration process, as their son Robin explains, 'the stress levels have clearly exacerbated their medical conditions, affecting their quality and length of life.'

In 2005, the Josephs and their family were buoyed by what was later revealed as a false promise of permanent residency. Minister McGauran wrote advising that he had decided to consider intervening in their case on humanitarian grounds. They met all requirements, and 'waited eagerly', hoping that they would simply receive their right to refuge and freedom.

As Fredrick wrote in his letter to the Minister, 'We desire peace and knowledge of what our future holds. We have lived here, attended church here and watched our children and grandchildren as part of the culture here. It would be true to say that, with so much involved, we have developed affection for Australia and the people.'

Instead, they received a letter from Minister Vanstone over 12 months later in 2006 explaining that she was overriding the earlier decision and instead placing them in a queue for an Aged Parent Visa. The government's capping system will see the Josephs in a queue for up to ten years until they receive a visa that, cruelly, they may now be ineligible for due to their ailing health.

Shortly after this decision, Fredrick had his second stroke, losing movement in the right side of his body. Unsurprisingly, the Joseph's family have concluded that the government's plan is to 'leave our parents to die in Australia, without any Medicare and support'.

Currently, the Josephs are on a Bridging Visa E ironically with work rights. Both Fred and Ruth are too frail to work and have extensive health conditions, however their Bridging Visa denies them access to medicare. Ruth and Fredrick were shocked to learn at the Medicare counter last month that yet again their right to medicare had been taken away. As it stands, they will be over 90 years old; and have waited around 20 years before receiving permanent access to medicare and a permanent visa.

The Joseph's case reveals what appears to be a governmental culture of contempt for human rights. Tragically there are many asylum seekers and Australian citizens, whose lives have been severely damaged by the government's actions. It is unclear whether these cases reveal gross inhumanity or grave incompetence.

When an Australian resident, Cornelia Rau, was imprisoned for ten months, the treatment she received in Baxter Detention Centre contributed to the deterioration in her mental health. Then Vivian Alvarez was wrongly deported to the Philippines and abandoned for five years, even when the Department discovered that they had made a mistake.

Looking at cases such as these it is hard not to conclude that calculated neglect and mismanagement were the cause. There are many similar untold stories of vulnerable people incarcerated, silenced, abandoned and deported.

As Secretary of the Department, Andrew Metcalfe, explains, 'DIMA staff have remarkable powers, including the authority to deprive

Community Care Pilot – not caring enough

In 2006, as a response to the damning Palmer and Comrie reports, DIAC launched a \$5 million Community Care Pilot to meet the needs of vulnerable clients.

'This program is a great idea that could be a vital safety net for asylum seekers if expanded, properly funded and actually did what it claims to' Kon Karapanagiotidis, ASRC founder said.

The reality though is a little different. Clients, including Fredrick and Ruth Joseph, were denied access to it, eligibility requirements were never made available by the department and when the Department kept claiming that there are no resources to take on cases, the pilot was revealed as a complete deception.

ASRC caseworker, Heidi Abdel-Raouf, explains that 'the ASRC referred a woman terminally ill with cancer back in February, still no response. The pilot assessed a man with serious health and mental health issues in February, still no assistance. The pilot said they would prioritise a man who was hospitalised with psychosis, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, nothing ...

These people are destitute, desperate and struggling to survive and DIAC continues to turn a blind eye.'

Kon Karapanagiotidis explains that there is no commitment from DIAC to this pilot, 'it's simply their Trojan horse, to distract from the reality of what they are doing to asylum seekers'.

people of their liberties'. They have exercised this power, at times carelessly, without checks and balances, and without anyone ever being held accountable.

To date, no response has been received from Minister Andrews following repeated written requests for compassionate assistance for the Joesphs.

The Australian government's extraordinary abdication of responsibility in these devastating and little-known cases is a fundamental betrayal of the Australian principles of compassion and fairness.

What can you do? Take a stand.

Write to your MP; get involved as a volunteer at the ASRC; get involved in Refugee Week; take up our challenge and *Live Like an Asylum Seeker for a Week* – visit www.asrc.org.au for details; become a sponsor of the ASRC – see back page.

REFLECTIONS



In this issue we introduce a new column, **Reflections**. Ghanaian asylum seeker, **Lillian Abbew** writes from her heart as she waits in hope.

My world – when another man decides on my happiness

The lights beam through into my bedroom window. My gaze is fixed but on no thing. But I could swear I counted cosmos rings from within empty space. Their colours radiate from fresh tears. Jazz my little dog barks fiercely. He is actually a gift meant to keep me cheerful. I swing my head around and come face to face with the clock. Twenty past eleven – almost half a day and still in bed!

But this is nothing new. At least not in my life. I have always counted moments into hours, days into weeks and weeks into months – and they have become years. Years of waiting in a world of uncertainty, where no one makes a promise for fear of breaking a faint heart as mine. In this kind of world, people can see what they really want but it is kept out of their reach; people tell their anguishing stories but are not heard. Just when you think you have found a new life, and you believe you are heard, it turns out to be a mirage.

This is my world and I share it with many other women and children who have also been asylum seekers for years. Your own guilt hits you as you raise a complaint among such people whose troubles far outweigh your own. Some have never had any rights to work within Australia,

no medical care, rights to study and many have been in detention centres. The strain and frustrations are clear in their faces. Like myself, their fate is in the hands of the immigration department. Their very happiness is entangled into some policies and decision-makings that no-one understands.

I made the decision to live in Australia to create a better meaning out of my life. Helping out in areas at the Asylum Seekers Resource Centre has really helped me in achieving a state of wellbeing. I have discovered ways where I can put my talents and skills to good use such as in the Publications Team and Small Business Network at the ASRC, and most recently radio broadcasting at 3ZZZ Community Radio. Being active at functions within my Ghanaian community has also brought me enormous friendships and networks.

I live on the food parcels I receive each week from the ASRC, 2 donated met-tickets so I can travel in to the city, second-hand clothes, legal and medical care from the ASRC and a small monthly allowance from the Hotham Mission. Being so dependent on others makes me feel so helpless.

I have learnt to cherish the brief moments with friends but when I am back in my house on my own my thoughts often turn to tears. I long for certainty so I can feel I have control over my own life again.

Imposed poverty has a terrible toll

ASRC's founder Kon Karapanagiotidis reveals a deep frustration and rage at on-going governmental policies that are a far cry from the Australian ethos of the 'fair go for all'.

IT'S BEEN 6 years since I started the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC) and in this time I have seen a great deal of positive change for asylum seekers. When the ASRC first opened its doors, public awareness about the plight of asylum seekers was almost non-existent with only a handful of people actively working for change. There were even fewer support networks for asylum seekers.

Over these 6 years I have personally witnessed the birth of a wonderful movement for social change, with people from all walks of social, cultural and religious life joining together to create a more just and humane society. We have had thousands of people – from 12 year old high school children to 84 year old diggers – volunteer their time. Thousands more have brought in donations of food and money to the centre, and scores more have created grassroots networks to house and support asylum seekers. This proves that as a community we can make a difference and we all have.

However, I still remain angry as there has been no government culture change – the Howard government refuses to learn from its past failings. They continue with what appears to be a deliberate policy of destitution - forcing asylum seekers into lives of poverty and homelessness. We still have Mandatory Detention, Temporary Protection Visa's, offshore prisons such as Christmas Island being built and Bridging Visa E's that don't allow people to work, have an income or access to health care.



Foodbank at the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre receives an intake of donated food

Each week I encounter asylum seekers like Chen* who after 5 years in detention are driven to hunger strikes and suicide attempts out of utter despair. Young men like Amir*, who continue to be dumped from detention centres on Friday afternoons with nothing but a bus ticket and a few dollars and end up at the ASRC because they are homeless and hungry.

I continually see the injustice everywhere each day at the ASRC: pregnant women like Maria* turning up at the centre 7 months pregnant and homeless with no health care and not once having access to a doctor; of fathers like Mohammed* pushed to the point of suicide from the shame and humiliation of not being able to provide for their families; to small children like 3 year old Omar* who turn up at the centre malnourished and sick due to the squalid conditions they are forced to grow up in.

We must remember that an injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere and we all must act now!

**names changed*

Please consider making a tax-deductible donation before June 30 to The Asylum Seeker Resource Centre and help us to provide for families with no income or right to work. You can donate online at: www.asrc.org.au

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Make a difference – become a Member today

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Asylum Seeker Resource Centre
67 Jeffcott Street
West Melbourne, 3003

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Asylum Seeker Resource Centre
03 9326 5199

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ASRC respects your privacy and observes provisions of the Privacy Act 2001. Your contact details will be used for ASRC business only and will not be sold to other organisations.

I would like to make a single tax-deductible donation to the ASRC of:
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I would like to join the ASRC by becoming an ASRC Member
 Your membership fee will go directly to support the ASRC. A one-year membership of \$40 will provide: food for 5 asylum seekers for one month OR free medical care for 8 asylum seekers for a week. For further details please visit www.asrc.org.au
 \$40 Individual \$20 Concession \$60 Household

I would like to become a Monthly Supporter of the ASRC
 I would like to commence my monthly supporter's subscription, to be paid automatically through my credit card to save on administration costs and further contribute to the protection and promotion of the human rights of asylum seekers in Australia.
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