



Advocacy for Inclusion

Incorporating People with Disabilities ACT

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Professor Genevieve Bell
Vice-Chancellor and President
The Australian National University

The Honourable Julie Bishop
Chancellor
The Australian National University

cc. Phoenix O'Neill, President, ANUSA

Dear Vice-Chancellor, Chancellor, and Members of the University Council,

I am writing on behalf of Advocacy for Inclusion (AFI), a Canberra disability advocacy organisation dedicated to promoting and advancing the human rights and inclusion of people with disabilities in the community.

AFI seeks to lodge a complaint regarding comments made on Wednesday 30 October by Professor Peter Collignon AM on ABC Radio Canberra. The comments which concern us are [available here](#) from 3:21:19 and an extract is at [Attachment A](#). When speaking about considerations for future pandemics, Professor Collignon effectively suggested placing a monetary value on lives in emergency situations and suggested that different lives, including older lives had a reduced value. He also assigned a figure to these lives of \$50,000.

We understand that Professor Collignon is a public figure who makes regular commentary on public health matters however when making public appearances Professor Collignon is described as a serving Professor at the Medical School of the Australian National University.

We feel that these specific comments are so inappropriate and offensive to marginalised groups that we need to ask whether these views reflect the views of the Australian National University.

Applying a cost benefit approach to healthcare in situations of humanitarian emergency based on personal characteristics like age or disability is out of step with human rights including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disability.

Advocating the assessing and valuing of human lives in this “hard nosed” manner is ageist, ableist, and at odds with community standards and bioethics principles.

In April 2020, internationally recognised independent experts in the area of human rights, bioethics, and disability came together in a [statement of concern](#) to emphasise key human rights principles and standards that need to underpin ethical decision-making in the context of disability and the COVID-19 pandemic. This made it clear that people with disability had an inherent right to life, equal access to healthcare and treatment in situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies. Professor Collignon’s comments do not align with these principles, nor with the principles enshrined in the ACT Human Rights Act 2004.

Given the significant role universities play in shaping societal values and fostering inclusive environments, we seek clarification on whether these views:

- A) meet the standards and expectations of the ANU in forming and communicating public policy advice and;
- B) reflect the position of the Australian National University including the way it sees and treats older students and students with disability.

In an era of mistrust, it is crucial for academic institutions to walk their stated values in public commentary and uphold principles of respect and equity, especially regarding the most vulnerable people in times of emergency.

We would appreciate any statements or actions the university is prepared to take in response to this incident.

We would like this note to be circulated to Members of the University Council.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. We look forward to your response.

Regards,



Craig Wallace

Head of Policy

Advocacy for Inclusion

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31 October 2024

Attachment A

Comments on ABC Radio Canberra by Professor Peter Collignon, Professor at the Medical School of the Australian National University:

“If we do get [another pandemic] happening in 5- or 10-years’ time at least we’ve costed and looked at a cost benefit. What is a life worth? Well interestingly in health economics if you’re doing an intervention or even a vaccine a life is probably worth \$50,000 per good quality life year so when people say you can’t put a price on life in fact health always does when they’re making decisions about allocating billions of dollars and we need to look at that. If you’re going to actually put in severe restrictions and it’s going to cost you billions of dollars in your economy you’ve got to look at how many lives are you really going to save from that and what is the age of those lives. Saving a 15-year old is different to saving an 85 year old. If you’re 85 you have a different attitude but you’ve got to be a bit hard nosed about this in how you allocate resources in society and how you interfere in people’s livelihoods as well as trying to make their health as well as you can with the resources you have.”