

This is the unedited version of a column which appeared in *Australian Doctor* in 2004. Minor changes may have been made to the published piece.

Media Bites: Doctors' wives make a stand

Helena Stace still gets a catch in her voice when talking about how she spent December 25 last year. It was her most profound Christmas ever, she says.

She celebrated the day with asylum seekers in the detention centre in her home town of Port Hedland. She assisted at a Uniting Church Service, and watched as two women, incarcerated with their children, broke down in heart-rending sobs during the service.

She also watched as children opened presents sent from all over Australia. The guards insisted these be opened in their presence, for security reasons.

Ms Stace, 57, an active member of the Rural Family Medical Network, is part of a new political phenomenon which hit the spotlight at the recent federal election - the so-called "doctors' wives".

The term was coined to describe traditionally conservative voters who have become socially active, many outraged by the Australian Government's treatment of asylum seekers.

Ms Stace is a doctor's wife both literally and politically. She is the first to admit that she doesn't fit the stereotype of a social justice campaigner.

A Liberal voter all her life, she was too busy during a long career in nursing and aged care management to become involved in social campaigning. When she retired, she had no particular interest in issues such as refugees.

"I just thought that it is somebody else's problem, that it's not my problem" she says. "I probably went along with the popular thinking."

Nor does she fit the stereotype of "doctors' wives" which emerged at the recent election. It was used almost as a put down to describe privileged do-gooders from wealthy suburbs.

Ms Stace and her husband live in what many would regard as substandard housing - a simple fibro cottage provided by the local hospital. Accommodation for doctors' families in the area has been a thorny issue for many years.

It was a chance conversation at a medical conference in Barcelona last year which started her thinking about refugees. She was surprised when chatting to European delegates that they knew of her hometown - because of its detention centre.

"Someone asked if it was as bad as you see it on TV," she says. "I said, 'I don't know'. I was a bit embarrassed that other people had this impression and I had chosen not to be interested."

Not long after, Ms Stace accompanied her local Uniting Church Minister on a visit to the detention centre. It was the beginning of an absorbing passion as she began to meet asylum seekers and hear their stories.

"I just found the whole thing totally confronting," she says. "I grew up thinking Australia was the land of the free and that the right thing will be done. I have realised that is not the case with regard to refugees."

"We may well look back on this time and say it was a shameful period in our history."

When the Port Hedland centre closed in May and detainees were moved to the Baxter centre in SA, she continued to visit detainees who had become part of her family's lives. She found the Baxter centre a "most awful and forboding place". As of November, 249 people were being held there, according to Government figures.

Ms Stace writes to politicians, helps lawyers research cases, and provides support to several detainees. She and her husband have become particularly close to several men, including a doctor who were in Port Hedland Detention Centre.

"We have several overseas trained doctors in our community," she says. "We are recruiting overseas trained doctors and yet here are these university graduates asking for asylum and we are treating them in this abominable way."

When Ms Stace held a function for the refugee lobby group Just Australia, just before the election, she expected a few dozen people to show. Instead, 50 people, including three former detention centre guards, crowded into her small home.

For the record, Ms Stace voted Democrats at the last election. It was not easy for her to abandon almost 40 years of support for the Liberals.

Her vote may not have influenced the election result, but she is helping to make a difference for people in desperate circumstances.

It seems a sign of strange times when a term such as “doctors’ wives” is used perjoratively to describe acts of compassion and grace.