June 19, 2018

Statement issued by William Dietz, MD, PhD, Chair of the Sumner M. Redstone Center for Prevention and Wellness at the Milken Institute School of Public Health at The George Washington University, in response to the separation of children and families at the U.S. border:

The Trump Administration’s decision to forcibly separate immigrant children from their families at the U.S.-Mexico border constitutes intentional child abuse by our government. It is inhumane, inexcusable and must end. There is no policy or political rationale that can justify this barbaric practice, which runs contrary to every basic tenet of child welfare and medical practice.

In just the six weeks the so-called zero tolerance policy has been in place, over 2,000 children have been taken away from their parents, sometimes separated from their siblings, with no reliable means to communicate with their parent nor plan for reunification. While the pictures and reports of children crying for their parents is horrifying and recalls other dark times in our history, the trauma inflicted on these children will have life-long health consequences. As Dr. Kraft, president of the American Academy of Pediatrics has pointed out, loss of a parent can cause permanent alterations in brain function. Such children are less likely to achieve their developmental milestones and more likely to develop mental illness, abuse drugs, and suffer from chronic diseases such as obesity and diabetes. To make matters worse, many of these same children are already vulnerable, through experiencing the violence that led their parent to flee and enduring the hazards of a dangerous journey. These experiences are amplified when the very person who could help them cope with these traumas—a loving parent—has been removed from their lives.

We can and should have a debate about the best way to fix our immigration system and how best to address the violence and poverty that causes so many families to seek refuge in the United States. What is not debatable are the fundamental principles that families belong together and that children should never be intentionally harmed.

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