

Doctors dismiss Islam's link to terrorism

Rebecca Urban, The Australian, 12:00AM May 29, 2017

An outspoken health lobby group has weighed into the divisive debate on terror, dismissing “inherent links” between Islam and terrorism and calling on an influential parliamentary committee to do the same.

The Public Health Association of Australia, comprising doctors, researchers and health academics, has asked the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade to take a stand on the issue when it releases its much-anticipated report into the status of religious freedom later in the year.

“The PHAA urges the committee to include a recommendation in its report that disavows the notion there is any inherent link between Islam and terror,” the submission says. “The committee should condemn any politician who refers divisively ... to any religious or ethnic group for the purpose of political gain.”

The tabling of the submission — one of almost 200 presented to the inquiry so far — coincided with last week's terrorist attack in Manchester, which claimed the lives of 22 concert-goers, many of them children and teenagers.

The suicide bomb attack, by British-born Salman Abedi, 22, reportedly radicalised by Islamic State recruiters, has reignited public tensions around the issue, with mounting concerns about radical Islamism offset by some attempts to play down the threat.

It also comes as Australian Security Intelligence Organisation head Duncan Lewis last week denied there was evidence to suggest a link between refugees and terrorism in Australia when quizzed at a Senate hearing.

The PHAA submission was co-signed by its president and former politician Michael Moore, Curtin University professor of international health Jaya Duntas, and David Legge, a scholar emeritus in public health at La Trobe University.

With almost 2000 members, the association's aim is to enhance population health results based on prevention, the social determinants of health and equity principles. As part of that, it develops “evidence-based” policies and advocates for these with governments at all levels.

Mr Moore told The Australian that religious intolerance was a serious matter, particularly in relation to Islam, and current divisive leadership on the issue was relevant to the inquiry. “When you look at terrorism and the IRA, I don't think many people blamed Christianity for terrorism when clearly there was an overlay. In fact there's nothing inherent in Christianity that links to terrorism,” he said. “Intolerable behaviour is intolerable behaviour and ... because individuals might frame that around Islam doesn't mean we should accept that.”

Macquarie University political theorist Stephen Chavura described the request as “ridiculous” and said it appeared the PHAA wished to condemn “non-politically correct statements” about religion.

“What on earth kind of authority does the Public Health Association of Australia have to declare on the connection between Islam and terror?” he said. “Just because there might not be an ‘inherent link’, doesn’t mean that there is no connection at all. The fact is there is a connection between some modes of Islamic expression and terrorism. “Whether it’s ‘true’ Islam is irrelevant for the state to decide. It’s an issue for theologians.”

Dr Chavura said that division on an issue as complex as terrorism was “simply part of what it is to live in an open society”.

Senator Jacqui Lambie, who has previously advocated deportation for Muslims who endorse sharia law, said that links did exist between terrorism and religions or movements with extreme views.