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Healthcare providers build bridges to better refugee health

A report into the health needs of Syrian and Iraqi refugees and asylum seekers has highlighted that primary healthcare professionals have an important role in improving refugees access and utilisation of health services.

Wentworth Healthcare, provider of the Nepean Blue Mountains Primary Health Network (NBMPHN), commissioned Western Sydney University to undertake research to identify the health needs and priorities of the Syrian and Iraqi communities and assess them against existing services in the region.

The report, *“Addressing the Needs of Syrian and Iraqi Refugees in the Nepean Blue Mountains Region”* found that Iraqi and Syrian refugees have difficulties in accessing healthcare due to language barriers, the lack of interpreters, unfamiliarity with the health system, distrust of government services, transportation problems and long waiting times.

Against a backdrop of other priorities when they arrive in Australia such as employment, settling into the community and taking care of their families, they did not regard health as a priority.

The research revealed that refugees ‘normalised mental health issues’ and are significantly influenced by their beliefs concerning health, religious and other non-pharmacologic and alternate healing practices and the cultural stigma of mental health.

Lizz Reay, CEO of Wentworth Healthcare, said ‘the research highlights the inequities for a small but growing number of refugees and asylum seekers that have chosen to settle in our region’.

“There is limited understanding of the health and health service needs of refugees so this research is instrumental in helping NBMPHN and other service providers to plan and build a primary healthcare system that ensures all people can access can access the right care, in the right place at the right time”.

“NBMPHN will work closely with General Practice and other health and non-health organisations in our area that assist refugees to identify gaps and build bridges between service providers to improve health outcomes”

In response to the report, NBMPHN has rolled out an online training program produced by SBS for local primary healthcare professionals. This program will increase their understanding of the Syrian and Iraqi culture, among others, and their skills when engaging with people from diverse backgrounds.

Last year, more than 65.3 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide due to war, violence, persecution and abuse of human rights. In 2010, the Nepean Blue Mountains region received 503 migrants, 79% of whom settled in Penrith LGA.

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**The Nepean Blue Mountains PHN is a programme run by
Wentworth Healthcare – a not for profit organisation which
works to improve health for the communities of Blue Mountains,
Hawkesbury, Lithgow and Penrith.**