

EUPHActs on the Health of Asylum Seekers

"Meeting the health needs of the large number of asylum seekers and refugees presently seeking shelter in Europe is essential, but generally considered only as a threat and a new burden for our societies. However, it should rather be seen as an opportunity to develop health policies and practices that promote inclusive and qualified health services for everyone in a future Europe characterized by increasing mobility and multicultural societies."

Allan Krasnik, president of the EUPHA Section on Migrant and ethnic minority health

1. Asylum Seekers in Europe

An increasing number of people are seeking asylum protection in Europe. This is largely driven by wars and conflicts in Africa and the Middle East, such as Libya or Syria. People there are suffering from political upheaval and civil war, human rights abuse or similar strife. Many of them decide to flee their country and are willing to undergo great risks in order to reach Europe. In 2014, the European Union (EU) received around 626,000 asylum applications, the highest number since 1992. Between January and April 2015 alone over 35,000 migrants have arrived to Southern Europe by boat and more than 1,500 have died. In recent years the Mediterranean has appeared to be the most dangerous of the four most common sea routes used by refugees and migrants. Increasingly migrants choose other routes, crossing the Balkans and entering the Schengen zone in Hungary. During the period of January – May 2015, more than 40,000 irregular migrants have crossed the Serbian – Hungarian border.

2. What are common health problems among this migrant population?

Migrants, including many asylum seekers, are young and often very motivated to ensure a good and productive life in their new country. However, refugees or asylum seekers have often been faced with mental or physical violence, experienced war or other human rights abuses or were exposed to other extreme situations. Further, according to the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR), once in Europe, undocumented migrants are faced with harassment, exploitation and even sexual abuse because governments fail to recognise refugees' working rights. Through these experiences, refugees have a high risk of developing mental health problems. Post-Traumatic Stress disorders are common amongst them, as are depression and anxiety. In addition, some groups of undocumented migrants are often insufficiently vaccinated, have nutritional deficiencies, suffer from infectious diseases (such as gastrointestinal infections or latent tuberculosis) or dental diseases.

3. What are the challenges?

Asylum seekers are in need of immediate help and shelter. Often they require psycho-social support and other forms of healthcare. However, since the number of migrants is constantly increasing, countries hit most by this *humanitarian crisis* (Italy, Greece, Malta and Spain), are overwhelmed and do not have sufficient human and financial resources. Asylum seekers often end up in detention or reception centers or even sleeping on the street. Although these centers are meant for material support, they often offer poor conditions and may look and feel

Undocumented migrants struggle to obtain healthcare in Europe. Multiple reasons for this have been identified, including the inability to pay, cultural or language barriers, unawareness of entitlement to healthcare and fear of detection due to information being passed on to the authorities. Additionally, relevant mental health services are often unavailable. Thus, although refugees are strongly in need of support, they lack access to adequate health and wellbeing facilities including health assessments, healthcare services, sanitary facilities and minimum standards of living. It needs to be understood that a successful health reception is a pre-condition for successful integration – and there is a significant shortage of appropriately trained health care personnel and training programmes directed towards these migrants and their needs..

4. How has the EU responded?

There has been a lack of solidarity in dealing with the migration issue in Europe. The EU kept prioritising border control rather than improvement of European asylum and reception systems including health care reception policies and facilities. Between 2007 and 2013 the EU spent about 700 million Euro to support asylum procedures compared to over 1,500 million Euro spent on border controls.

Following the large number of deaths in the Mediterranean Sea recently, the EU adopted a 10-point plan and proposed further changes (such as the quota system for allocating refugees amongst MS). However, there was very little attention on how to ensure immediate, sufficient health services as well as access to and quality of appropriate health services for the large group of people seeking shelter in Europe.

EUPHA remains committed



In a recent press release, EUPHA called on Europe's governments to do more to respond to the humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean. EUPHA believes that a strengthened presence through a coordinated professional search and rescue operation is urgently required to stop the unnecessary loss of human life as migrants attempt to cross the Mediterranean. Migrants arriving on European Union territory should be treated in a responsible and dignified manner. Health systems need to be supported to respond both to their immediate health needs as well as towards ensuring their access to health services in the long term particularly to psychological support services. This can only be achieved if all European countries share responsibility for integrating migrants in their societies.

It must be acknowledged that the real solution to resolve the crisis requires a coherent and strategic response to address the push factors that abound in Africa and the Middle East which have led to thousands of migrants left stranded in Libya, without access to basic infrastructure and exposed to daily violence.

In its press release EUPHA is calling upon European Governments to demonstrate leadership in committing to meaningful and sustainable development goals and development aid since this is the only manner in which desperate mass migration can be addressed in the medium to long term.

For full text of press release [here](#).