

VIEWS AND REVIEWS



PERSONAL VIEW

Stop denying migrants their fundamental right to healthcare

Undocumented migrants have particular healthcare needs, including those related to torture, but countries are restricting access

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Many people think that all migrants to Europe have meaningful access to healthcare. As article 35 of the European Union's Charter of Fundamental Rights recognises, "Everyone has the right of access to preventive health care and the right to benefit from medical treatment".¹

But the reality is different: as the European Parliament acknowledged in 2013, "Access to the most basic healthcare services, such as emergency care, is severely limited, if not impossible, for undocumented migrants on account of the identification requirement, the high price of treatment and the fear of being detected and reported to the authorities."²

Two thirds of the 15 648 migrants attending clinics throughout Europe in 2014 run by the charity Médecins du Monde had no access to healthcare coverage. And four in five people (1154 of 1395) presenting in the United Kingdom had been unable to access a general practitioner.³

News media reports

News media in many countries are prone to reporting that generous access to healthcare in Europe promotes migration. This suggests that migrants are direct competitors for limited healthcare resources and should therefore not have access to them.^{4 5}

Médecins du Monde says that only 3% of the 15 648 migrants reported being motivated to travel to Europe for personal health reasons. On average, migrants sought healthcare for the first time some 6.5 years after their arrival in Europe. Only a 10th (9.5%) of migrants with chronic illnesses knew about their condition before migration.³

And many migrants are not healthy young men, as is often assumed: 88% of refugees arriving in Greece from Syria in February 2016 were travelling with a family member, and 43% were female.⁶ Two in five migrants (40%) in Greece are children, a 10th of whom are unaccompanied.⁷

Some 85% of Médecins du Monde's patients have experienced violence—before, during, or after their migration.³ A third of people seeking asylum have been tortured.⁸ Migrants have considerable healthcare needs that must therefore be recognised and respected by European nations.

Fear driven policy making

Instead of honouring a humanitarian obligation to provide healthcare to refugees in the context of unprecedented migration from conflict in Syria and Iraq, Europe is taking a series of regressive, harmful, political steps—policy making driven by fear.

States are in a "race to the bottom" to make themselves as unattractive as possible to migrants.^{9 10} Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland deprive migrants of their assets before they are allowed access to state support. The Spanish government in 2012 removed rights to healthcare for unregistered migrants. The UK's Immigration Act 2014 aims to make it "more difficult for 'illegal' immigrants to live in the UK." And the UK Department of Health is consulting on plans to implement charging for emergency and primary care for migrants, a course of action that will "make the NHS one of the most restrictive healthcare systems in Europe for undocumented migrants."¹¹

These actions constrain access to healthcare for migrants and worsen migrant health throughout Europe. Increasingly unwell, unhappy, and isolated migrant communities are an almost inevitable consequence of these discriminatory actions. Instead, governments throughout Europe should seize the opportunity to reverse their recent regressive political course.

Only then can they honour their humanitarian obligations to provide care to the people in greatest need and set an example to future generations, of how the politics of fear and insularity may be eschewed in favour of openness and humanity.

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Representatives of Médecins du Monde will speak about delivering healthcare to migrants in Europe at the International Forum on Quality and Safety in Healthcare, 12-15 April 2016, in Gothenburg, Sweden (<http://internationalforum.bmj.com>).

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