Providing hope and healthcare to displaced people and refugee communities in Africa

Worldwide, some 12 million people are refugees and a further 21 million are otherwise displaced from their homes and communities. These people have fled their homes to avoid threats such as war and persecution, famines, environmental disasters and poverty (Global IDP Project 2005; Forced Migration Online 2007).

Refugees and other displaced people are some of the most vulnerable populations in the world. In addition to losing the security of a home, employment and social networks, they are at high risk of poor health and nutrition, violence and human rights violations. In particular, the loss of basic necessities such as clean water, proper sanitation and stable living conditions, combined with devastated health services, make refugees and displaced persons highly susceptible to disease (International Rescue Committee 2006; UN High Commissioner for Human Rights 2005).

As a global research-based pharmaceutical company Merck & Co., Inc. believes that responding to global health challenges, such as the health of refugees, is not just a humanitarian imperative but also a strategic necessity. Our primary role in healthcare is to discover and develop innovative medicines and vaccines, and to facilitate access to these products. But we cannot facilitate such access alone. This is why we promote and participate in numerous public/private partnerships, particularly in the developing world, to help build infrastructure and achieve targeted goals in prevention and treatment of major diseases. By responding to public health needs in ways that reinforce the efforts of governments and civil society, we can help set the course for economies and societies to improve population health (Merck & Co., Inc., 2007a).

One collaboration that is helping to address the challenge of refugee health is the Nursing Libraries for Refugee Health (NLRH), a partnership among the International Council of Nurses (ICN), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees – the agency responsible for safeguarding the rights and well-being of refugees – and Merck & Co., Inc.

This partnership aims to bring current health information to nurses and other health workers serving refugees. In camps and refugee communities in Africa, nurses deliver more than 80 per cent of healthcare and are the principal caregivers for people affected by HIV/AIDS. As Judith Oulton, ICN Chief Executive Officer, has said: 'Nurses are the backbone of all health systems, but in sub-Saharan Africa they carry a double burden and are often all that stands between hope and total collapse.' For this, society owes nurses a great debt of gratitude.

The NLRH is a natural extension of the ICN/Merck Mobile Libraries, a partnership established in 2001 with ICN, Merck and Elsevier, the leading publisher of nursing textbooks, to help nurses in rural Africa gain access to healthcare information that is authoritative, extensive and up-to-date.

Each library consists of 91 specially selected books and manuals on such disparate topics as disease prevention and treatment, surgery and anaesthesia, family and community health and instructions on how to manage a health centre. The books are housed in specially designed transportable trunks built to withstand moisture, insects and the rigors of transport.

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In the last five years, Elsevier has packed and shipped 178 such Libraries from London and assisted with customs formalities; ICN has coordinated and overseen the program in collaboration with its member national nursing associations in Africa. Merck has provided the money to supply the books, including the donation of various Merck Manuals. For more than 100 years, Merck has supported health and medical education as a public service through the publication of The Merck Manual, now the world’s best-selling medical text, translated in 17 languages (Merck & Co., Inc., 2007b). To date, tens of thousands of people in more than 300 clinical settings in 17 countries have benefited from the presence of the Mobile Libraries.

In 2006, 50 NLRH reached Tanzania and Zambia, where more than 770,000 refugees currently live (ICN/MSD libraries reach refugee camps in Tanzania and Zambia 2006). The Libraries and related training will increase access to the latest nursing and health information and help better meet refugee health priorities. A key indicator for the program’s success will be whether the availability of up-to-date books on malaria – the greatest cause of death in Africa – has improved the knowledge of healthcare workers. One nurse was clear about the benefits: ‘The malaria training was very good and we learned a lot. We have changed our practice in the use of malaria drugs with pregnant women and with children and also know more about managing drug reactions.’ (The Nursing Library for Refugee Health Communiqué 2006)

An ongoing evaluation of the Mobile Library initiative in refugee settings has demonstrated great advantages. The Libraries help address nurse education and training needs practically and directly, while at the same time building capacity and enhancing the quality of healthcare for African communities. A nurse in Zambia told an evaluator: ‘We value this library very highly. It will help to keep the nurses interested in nursing. It will also help increase morale and should help us improve the quality of care. I hope it will help stimulate an interest in and love of nursing – not just doing a job.’ (Hughes 2006)

Nursing professionals worldwide can take pride in this powerful example of the health impact that comes from the partnership of business, the public sector and caring and resilient nurses on the front lines in communities. I encourage you to learn more about the Mobile Libraries initiatives and related training opportunities to Linda Carrier-Walker, ICN’s Director of Communications and External Relations, at carrwalk@icn.ch. Anyone interested in making a donation or purchasing a Mobile Library, may go to: http://www.icn.ch/mobile.htm

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References


