



Connecting Physicians and Refugee Families Through Education

By Emily Tomlinson, MD; Jesse White, MD and Cynthia Zarazúa

Medical practitioners are inherently drawn to provide equal opportunities and access to health care for minority populations. There are innumerable barriers to health care including transportation, distance to clinics and specialty care, financial and insurance coverage, lack of childcare, and lack of paid time off from work to name a few.

Challenges to providing healthcare to refugee families

In addition to these common healthcare barriers, refugee populations experience unique barriers due to their history and social situation. Many refugee populations experience a lack of education in their home country and must first prioritize basic needs such as housing and food upon entry into the United States. This further isolates them from a Westernized healthcare system that incentivizes preventative care for those who have a baseline understanding of how the system works. Many refugees come from homelands where doctors and medical facilities are not available, so home and folk remedies were their only options. Preventative care can be a new concept for many refugees, and preexisting health disparities can be augmented for them due to the real barriers of health care literacy and language.

The responsibility of the country accepting refugees is to provide an intake exam, but this does not address access to long term care. These families are often incredibly resilient and brave given the persecution they have experienced in their lives, but navigating the Western healthcare system can be daunting for them. Healthcare providers also struggle to provide quality care to them. The lack of equity for disadvantaged populations, coinciding with poor exposure to the use of interpreters creates a lack of cultural empathy in medical training. This prevents the growth of continuity of care these families deserve.

Building bridges between pediatric / medicine-pediatric residents and refugees to improve health literacy and healthcare

How do we bridge that gap to equip refugee populations with knowledge and skills to effectively navigate the US healthcare system to improve their overall health? And how do we prepare medical providers to better serve this population?

The MCW Pediatrics and Medicine-Pediatrics Residency program has partnered with the [Neighborhood House](#) of Milwaukee's International Learning Program (ILP) to help fill that gap through providing basic education on the American healthcare system to refugee families relocating to Milwaukee. The partnership focuses on resident physicians educating families regarding common topics and scenarios they will most likely encounter in our healthcare system. Topics include the differences between emergency care versus primary care, routine health examinations, seasonal respiratory viruses, vaccinations, and non-communicable diseases such as diabetes and hypertension.

Additionally, resident physicians have created simulated routine health examinations for ILP students to participate in with the purpose of familiarizing them to the types of questions and examinations that can occur within the US healthcare system. The goal is to meet refugee populations where they are at, to equip them with knowledge and skills to increase their healthcare literacy and navigation of the system to address their unique needs.

These exercises, through the use of local interpreters, help reduce the anxiety of the medical experience and mitigate the fear of medical professionals due to their familiarity and friendships with MCW staff. It also exposes young healthcare trainees to the unique medical needs of a population that is often forgotten but requires particular skills in order to best create a therapeutic relationship.

Together, the ILP and the Medical College of Wisconsin are connecting resident physicians and refugee families to help this population meet their basic medical needs through education about our healthcare system.

Emily Tomlinson, MD, is a second year Pediatrics resident at MCW and part of the Global Health Track, actively working with ILP in their educational sessions.

Jesse White, MD, is a second year Pediatrics resident at MCW and part of the Global Health Track, actively working with ILP in their educational sessions.

Cynthia Zarazúa is the ILP Program Manager and oversees teaching adult immigrants and refugees English, computer, math, and citizenship skills.