New nurse-led program looking after refugee health

More than 1,500 newly arrived refugees across Sydney have benefitted from a $1.5million nurse-led health screening program which began in October last year.

The Refugee Health Nurse Program provides health assessments and screening tests to newly arrived refugees across the state and links individuals and families to General Practitioners and the NSW Health system.

It also assists with coordination of initial health care for refugees with complex health needs, such as chronic illnesses or disability.

NSW Chief Health Officer Dr Kerry Chant visited NSW Refugee Health Service (RHS) on Wednesday 26 June to meet with RHS staff and nurses involved in the program.

RHS Director, Dr Mitchell Smith said all refugees who arrive in Sydney as part of the Offshore Humanitarian Program are offered an initial assessment through the Refugee Health Nurse Program.

“Within two weeks of arriving in Australia, refugees are seen at one of the 11 clinics we run across Sydney, with the exception of those who have been flagged overseas as having an immediate health problem, who are seen within 24 hours,” Dr Smith said.

“The Program provides an assessment of physical and psychological health issues, immunisation status, and blood screening for conditions commonly experienced by newly arrived refugees.

“We then link our clients up with a GP close to them who speaks their language if possible. We can also refer them to a range of mainstream and specialised health services if required,” he said.

Dr Smith said nurses in the Program are often the first health professionals the newly arrived refugees come into contact with in the country. The Program also assists refugees and asylum seekers who have come from immigration detention centres.

“As well as looking after the health needs of our clients, our nurses play an important role in introducing refugees to our health care services,” Dr Smith said.

“Many of the Program’s clients come from countries where the health care provided is very different to that in Australia. Refugee Health Nurses have the important role of helping them to understand and navigate our system,” he said.

The Refugee Health Nurse Program, funded by the NSW Government, employs 15 part-time nurses based at community health centres across Sydney and is run by NSW RHS, based at Liverpool.

RHS provides a range of clinical, health promotion and other programs to protect and promote the health of people of refugee background living in NSW. It is a centre for refugee health expertise, education and research in NSW.