

20 June 2019

Sydney's south west no stranger to diversity

Refugee Week is an opportunity to celebrate the contribution refugees make to our society and also raise awareness about their strength and resilience.

This year is also special as it marks 20 years since the NSW Refugee Health Service was established to assist refugees in NSW.

NSW Refugee Health Service Director Dr Mitchell Smith, who has been at the helm of the organisation from day one, said the Liverpool-based service had spent the last 20 years assisting newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers navigate the health system.

“When you look through the history, Sydney's south west hasn't been a stranger to welcoming migrants, particularly refugees,” he said.

“People from Eastern Europe originally settled in Cabramatta then the wave of Vietnamese people came in the 70s and 80s.

“Since then, we have seen refugee settlers from many regions, including the Balkans and the Middle East. Recently there has been the large influx of Syrian and Iraqi people. Southwestern Sydney has traditionally been a place where people from overseas have felt comfortable.”

Dr Smith said in its beginning, the NSW Refugee Health Service was a public health refugee screening program, addressing tuberculosis, hepatitis B and other infectious diseases at the old Lidcombe Hospital.

“As the profile of refugees changed in the 90s, so did the needs of the refugee program. As it moved more towards people from former Yugoslavia, then Iran and Iraq, infectious diseases were no longer a priority,” he said.

“The NSW Refugee Health Service was officially created in 1999, merging two existing services and adding further expertise, working out of Liverpool.”

Dr Smith was the inaugural director and remains in this role, a position he describes as challenging yet rewarding.

“For many new arrivals, the NSW Refugee Health Service is one of their first points of contact in Australia,” he said.

“Helping improve the health of some of our most vulnerable people is really important.

“We have a strong social justice philosophy; everyone who comes here, from staff to colleagues to students, refugees and asylum seekers are treated equally.”

Refugee stories were celebrated at Fairfield Youth and Community Centre including *MasterChef* contestant, Hoda Kobeissi, who shared a meal and her story, the theme of this year's Refugee Week.