

25 June 2019

Southwestern Sydney researcher's grant success

In a global first, Associate Professor Susan Rees has begun delving into the mental health impacts of being a refugee woman.

Based at Liverpool Hospital, the University of NSW Associate Professor, said her recently funded National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) study is unique, and very important to multicultural Australia.

"We will be able to answer specific questions related to the mental health of refugees, exposure to violence in the family and from past conflict and be able to identify factors that support and promote successful settlement for refugees.

Refugee women: the first cohort is the largest cohort study of its type in the world, with 1335 women – 685 refugees and 650 Australian-born women.

The women were recruited in antenatal clinics in Liverpool, Blacktown and the Monash Centre in Melbourne.

They are Arabic-speaking, Sudanese and Sri Lankan Tamils, the largest population of refugees in the three Australian locations.

"Being based at Liverpool was perfect to capture this previously unachievable task," she said.

"Liverpool, Blacktown and Monash are refugee-rich areas for recruitment and were great in getting together people from the same language-speaking backgrounds."

The study involved recruiting workers who spoke the same language as the participants, to interview and gather the information.

"We can see that refugees are missing in antenatal clinics, and that they might not be reporting important information related to exposure to intimate partner violence, or disclosing depressive symptoms ... and, while interpreters can be helpful, there are limitations related to trust and context," she said.

Associate Professor Rees, who is attached to South Western Sydney Local Health District's Academic Mental Health Unit, said when the study's specialised staff interviewed refugee women in their native tongue they got more accurate data.

"It just goes to show, if you give people the right setting you get a better and more accurate finding."

When the social scientist began working as a practitioner in the domestic violence and mental health fields, she saw an intersection with culture.

With little to no research available across the globe, she made it her mission to gain insight into disadvantaged cultural communities.

“There was a clear gap in the knowledge in Australia and worldwide. All the big studies were looking at mental health and domestic violence but didn’t include women who do not speak English.”

A NHMRC grant supported Associate Professor Rees’ original study, but the latest news that she had been successful with a second NHMRC grant to the tune of \$670,000, brought a smile to her face.

“This grant represents a world-first in the field of refugee women’s mental health. It focuses on a problem of national and global significance,” she said.

“The bigger agenda now is settlement. How do you settle well. What are the challenges and barriers for refugee women and what can we learn to help them settle and get on with their lives so they can make a contribution to society.”