Asylum Seekers

An asylum seeker is a person who has fled from his or her own country due to fear of persecution and cannot safely return there. They have applied for (legal and physical) protection in another country, but have not yet had their claim for protection finalised.

Asylum seekers (individuals and families) arrive in Australia by sea or by air. They may arrive without a visa, or with a valid visa such as a tourist or student visa, and then seek asylum. The manner and date of arrival to Australia will determine living arrangements and service eligibility for asylum seekers.

Asylum seekers may be living:
- In the community or under community detention (on bridging visas with various restrictions regarding accommodation, work rights, and benefits)
- In mainland Immigration Detention Centers
- In offshore centres/facilities (Nauru & Manus Is.)

Asylum seeker policy is quite fluid and can be difficult to navigate for both service providers and asylum seekers. Please see websites over page for current information.

Main health concerns

Like persons already classified as refugees, asylum seekers fleeing persecution and human rights abuses may have suffered psychological trauma, deprivation, torture and/or poor access to health care. People will have likely experienced significant psychological trauma and hardships in their journey to seek asylum.

Health problems commonly identified amongst community-based asylum seekers include:
- psychological disorders (eg depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder)
- musculo-skeletal problems (from injury or torture)
- gastro-intestinal disorders
- chronic diseases
- women’s health issues
- dental problems

Research shows there is deterioration in mental health the longer asylum seekers await determination of their migration status.

During this period, asylum seekers can be often in a destitute situation, dealing with multiple stressors. These stressors include: fear of being returned to their country of origin, unemployment, lack of money, limited English language skills, and separation from family. Compounding social issues can be housing insecurity, limited or no work rights, and social isolation. Asylum seekers may also be wary of using government services.

Access to health services

Immigration Detention

Offshore: Healthcare is contracted out by the Department of Home Affairs (DOHA), and is currently provided by International Health & Medical Services (IHMS). www.ihms.com.au/

Onshore: Primary Health Care in Immigration Detention Centres is provided by IHMS.

People in Community Detention

IHMS also manages health care for people in Community Detention. They maintain a network of health providers including GPs, pharmacists, allied health providers (e.g. optometrists), specialists, psychologists, dentists and diagnostics. Clients are allocated to a GP and a pharmacy, and will have an IHMS client ID card. Outside of GP visits, all health care must be approved by IHMS prior to the service.
People residing in the community
Access to health care for asylum seekers in the community can be variable depending on type of visa and their stage in the asylum application process.

Asylum seekers may or may not have access to Medicare.
Services such as Red Cross and Settlement Services International (SSI) can assist in accessing health care services through the Status Resolution Support Service (SRSS). [Refer also to the Health Services listed in this sheet].

Asylum Seekers without Medicare
Asylum Seekers without Medicare can obtain reasonable and essential health care under the NSW Health Policy PD2016_055 “Medicare Ineligible and Reciprocal Health Agreement, Classification and Charging”.

Whilst complex, and not explicitly stated in the policy, health services include (but are not limited to):
- emergency care and admission for acute medical and surgical conditions
- maternity, outpatient, mental health services, some elective surgery and limited dental care.

Note: The policy states that “Urgent clinical treatment for anyone presenting to a NSW health service should not be delayed while their status and eligibility are being determined”.

Prior to referral to a public health service, advocate for your patient by ensuring that the staff of the relevant service are aware of the policy and whether a fee waiver applies.

Medications
Asylum seekers are ineligible for a Health Care Card so cannot access subsidised medications. Even with Medicare, the cost of medications can be prohibitive, such that Asylum seekers often cease even essential medications due to cost.

Consider cost & ability of client to pay for medication prior to prescribing.

Access to private health services
Due to financial constraints, asylum seekers rarely have access to private health services (e.g. specialists, physiotherapists) even if they have Medicare.

If needed, consider referring to public outpatient clinics for specialist review, or for allied health care. Asylum seekers are unlikely to be able to afford private pathology, x-ray or medication costs.

Health Services that assist asylum seekers
- NSW Refugee Health Service: provides GP clinics for primary health care (Medicare not required), advocacy support for clients, and other services www.refugeehealth.org.au
- Asylum Seekers Centre: provides a range of free medical, dental and other support services; located in Newtown. www.asylumseekerscentre.org.au
- Health services that do not require Medicare: STARTTS, public Sexual Health Clinics, Chest Clinics, and Council child vaccination clinics.

Relevant services for asylum seekers

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asylum Seekers Centre</td>
<td>9361 5606</td>
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<tr>
<td>Australian Red Cross</td>
<td>9229 4266</td>
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<tr>
<td>House of Welcome</td>
<td>9727 9290</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jesuit Refugee Service</td>
<td>9356 3888</td>
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<tr>
<td>NSW Refugee Health Service</td>
<td>8778 0770</td>
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<tr>
<td>Refugee Advice &amp; Casework Service</td>
<td>9114 1794</td>
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<tr>
<td>STARTTS</td>
<td>9794 1900</td>
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Useful Websites
The Royal Children’s Hospital Melbourne: www.rch.org.au/immigranthealth/clinical/Asylum_seekers/

Contact NSW Refugee Health Service for further information on asylum seeker health access, or if you would like to join a register of doctors and dentists who provide occasional pro bono services to asylum seekers.

References and Further reading: