

ORAL HEALTH OF UTAH REFUGEES

Utah is home to over 26,000 refugees. They have fled their countries and are unable or unwilling to return because of persecution (race, religion, nationality, social group membership, political opinion) or a well-founded fear of persecution. Refugees are, therefore, in Utah legally. Through resettlement agencies, they are provided assistance with housing, English classes, and job development. In addition, when they first arrive, refugees receive 8 months of Medicaid. And, within the first 30 days after arrival they receive a health screening and treatment for communicable diseases. **For 3 months, dental services are provided by the Utah Department of Health. But after this time, refugees often do not receive dental care.**

Nevertheless, refugees are at high risk of having poor oral health for the following reasons:

- torture-related injuries to the mouth and face (it's estimated that Utah is home to as many as 17,500 torture survivors in refugee communities),
- limited or no access to dental care due to war or prolonged stays in refugee camps,
- disruption to dental hygiene practices, including a shortage of toothbrushes, toothpaste, clean water, and water fluoridation,
- impact of prolonged anxiety, including bruxism, gastroesophageal reflux, and reduced motivation for self-care and
- micro-nutrient deficiencies due to limited food access in exile.

What you can do. As you can see, you would be meeting a great need if you decided to provide care to refugees. Although refugees may take a little extra time as patients, ultimately, they can be the most rewarding of patients, as many health care providers have found. Refugees are extraordinarily resilient. They have survived challenges and traumatic experiences that are unfathomable to many of us. So please consider a rewarding experience--providing donated dental care to some refugees.

What not to do. If you do take on refugees as patients, you want to be sure not to re-traumatize them. So these are a few simple steps that can help:

- try to create a welcoming environment by explaining everything that you will do ahead of time, with an interpreter available if need be (usually the interpreter will be provided by the resettlement agency)
- avoid windowless rooms with closed doors as this can be reminiscent of torture; and
- allow the patient to have a sense of control during a procedure or the visit in general.

This is a most needed and rewarding work. To volunteer or ask questions contact Steven Steed, DDS, state dental director 801-538-9177 or stevensteed@utah.gov

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