Addressing Healthcare Disparities of Chicagoland Rohingya Refugees

United States of America, Lake Forest College
Project Leader: Bilaal Ansari, Lake Forest College
Team Members: Salman Javed, Lake Forest College, United States. Ahmed Malik, University of Chicago, United States. Sufyaan Syed, Northwestern University, United States.

Project Overview:

This Peace Project will facilitate the integration of Rohingya refugees into the Chicagoland area by educating them about mental health and diabetes. The Rohingya are a Burmese Muslim minority fleeing persecution. Their poor standard of living in Burma left many racked with health problems, and since a large number have settled in Chicago, there is a growing population of people with preexisting conditions that will worsen if left untreated. A study by Rahman et. al. on a sample of the Rohingya from Ukhiya, Cox’s bazar in Bangladesh, the largest global cluster of refugees, found that 44% had hypertension, 90% did not get sufficient physical activity, and nearly 20% were overweight. Additionally, risk factors such as poverty, loss of identity, and violence have impacted refugees’ mental health. All of this is exacerbated by a language barrier which prevents access to healthcare. Effectively, this is a budding public health crisis.

Therefore, we will partner with the Rohingya Cultural Center in Chicago (RCC) to conduct monthly interactive workshops administered by medical professionals. According to the representative, the most pressing health issues that the refugees face are diabetes and mental trauma. To address these issues, we hope to organize five workshops from May to September 2023. The first three months will address mental health. More time is allotted for mental health because it demands specialized discussion due to traumatic experiences such as beatings, forced labor, rape, and sleep deprivation. The effect of these experiences varies by age and gender which requires us to partner with psychiatrists of varying specialties who can speak Rohingya or Urdu. The first month will introduce the concept of mental health and its importance, then subsequent workshops will explore management strategies for traumas induced by genocide and relocation. Furthermore, our RCC contact explained that mental health is a heavily stigmatized topic in the community. The need to communicate in Rohingya or Urdu demands further nuance as we cannot assume the refugees are equipped with the terminology required to discuss mental health.

The last two months will be devoted to diabetes. Diabetes may have a more straightforward biological explanation, but it is harder to provide practical advice because it is a systemic problem whose intensity depends on many factors. Therefore, its treatment is highly individualistic. Our purpose, then, is to illuminate the correlation between lifestyle and the disease. We were told that this is the conceptual roadblock for many refugees who are diabetic. To that end, we will partner with a specialist who can communicate the link between diabetes and daily health choices.

Implementation:

To provide relief to the Rohingya refugees that have fled Burma, workshops hosted at the RCC will be conducted once a month to tackle the two most pressing concerns, diabetes and mental health. Dr. Khalid Afzal will lead mental health workshops from May to July. We will hold several meetings with Dr. Afzal to develop an interactive format and plan content. In order to boost attendance, marketing tactics such as brochures and incentives such as food and raffle prizes will be advertised to the Rohingya community through the cultural center. Workshop sessions will range from one to two hours and would occur once a month for five months total at the RCC with an expected attendance of up to 50 people. To assess impact and inform content, auditory surveys will be conducted regularly to measure biological indicators relating to mental health.

The first session will aim to introduce and destigmatize mental health. The second session will address coping mechanisms for trauma, stress, and recap the importance of mental health in case new refugees attend the workshops. The third session will be used as an extra session whose topic will be developed in response to the outcomes of the first two workshops. Encouragement of future interactions with the RCC to facilitate consistent healthcare attendance amongst the refugees will be a recurring theme.

Dr. Muhammad Aftab will lead the two diabetes workshops in August and September. As with the mental health workshops, we will hold several preparatory meetings to develop an interactive format and plan content. Marketing tactics, such as catering, raffles, and brochures will be used to boost attendance.
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The fourth workshop will explain diabetes and its symptoms to ensure that the refugees understand its severity. The last workshop will introduce management techniques such as dietary and lifestyle changes. Recurring surveys on biological indicators relating to diabetes will be used to gauge success.

**Timeline:**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>March</th>
<th>May</th>
<th>July</th>
<th>September</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preparatory meetings 1 and 2 with Dr. Afzal</td>
<td>Mental Health workshop 1. Hold preparatory meeting 5 with Dr. Afzal and preparatory meeting 1 with Dr. Afzal.</td>
<td>Mental Health workshop 3. Hold preparatory meetings 4 and 5 with Dr. Afzal. Complete workshop 5 development.</td>
<td>Diabetes workshop 2.</td>
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<td>Complete workshop 1 development and conduct initial surveys.</td>
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<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>June</td>
<td>August</td>
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<tr>
<td>Preparatory meetings 3 and 4 with Dr. Afzal</td>
<td>Mental Health workshop 2 and meeting 6 with Dr. Afzal. Complete workshop 3 development and preparatory meetings 2 and 3 with Dr. Afzal. Complete workshop 4 development.</td>
<td>Diabetes workshop 1.</td>
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**Anticipated Results:**

The true goal of this project is to make healthcare more equitable — education is the means to this end. Educating the refugees on the variety of ways that they can access healthcare will help them integrate into the broader system, thereby closing severe disparities. These are the community's most pressing issues, so our effort will aid the Chicago Rohingya population.

To gauge impact, we will implement consistent surveys so we can observe an upward trend in health and attitudes among the attendees. We intend to conduct surveys before and after each workshop to assess the change in the attendees' perception on the topic of the month. In addition to microscopic trends, we will address long-term trends by conducting surveys monthly to determine the evolution of attitudes towards general healthcare. Our partners will ensure that we respect the HIPPA guidelines.

This project is not an end in and of itself; it has the potential to cascade into a greater movement. This workshop strategy can be cleanly transposed to other Rohingya refugee communities, such as Milwaukee and Fort Wayne. Our team is connected with Fort Wayne pediatric cardiologist Dr. Mohammad Ghazali who has expressed interest in undertaking expansion. These plans, however, would require additional fundraising.

**Student Biographies:**

Bilaal Ansari is a sophomore at Lake Forest College studying Chemistry and Physics. His desire to impact others’ lives motivates his goal to study medicine. Salman Javed is a junior at Lake Forest College studying Biochemistry and Molecular Biology. He hopes this project can provide relief to the Rohingya Community. Ahmed Malik is a junior at the University of Chicago studying Biology. He aims to build on his prior volunteer experience with this project. Sufyaan Syed is a freshman at Northwestern University studying Global Health and Biology and he is enthusiastic about working for the betterment of the Chicago Rohingya population.