

Doctor offers refugees mental health assistance from afar

November 5 2014, by Ross Neitz



Saleem Al-Nuaimi (right) poses with a family during a trip to Syria.

Saleem Al-Nuaimi didn't know what to expect when he first visited Turkey on a medical mission in 2012 to help refugees fleeing the Syrian civil war. A psychiatric resident at the University of Alberta, Al-Nuaimi was eager to offer assistance to people suffering from the horrors of war. He wasn't prepared for what he saw.

"Desperation. Very cold eyes," remembers Al-Nuaimi. "That warmth, that human warmth, is very much missing, because people are hungry;

people have no access to medications and health."

The Syrian civil war has left more than 160,000 people dead since 2011 and forced millions into refugee camps in neighbouring countries. Over the past two years, Al-Nuaimi has travelled with [Canadian Relief for Syria](#) to the [refugee camps](#) in Turkey and Syria to offer help to people suffering mentally from the ravages of war. He has no previous connection to the country, other than his Muslim faith and a desire to help others who are suffering.

"It's basically providing a service that doesn't exist, because there are no mental health facilities in Syria," explains Al-Nuaimi. He adds that since his first day on the ground two years ago, his help has been in high demand. "I was at one of the camps, and I was sitting there about 16 hours and only one lady came the whole day. She had full-blown depression. I treated her with medication and she was very glad to be able to talk. Then the next day there was a long line of dozens of people who wanted to come and talk."

According to Al-Nuaimi, there are only a handful of psychiatrists in the region. With so much help needed and so few to provide it, Al-Nuaimi began an additional effort to reach out from his home in Edmonton.

"What we're doing is a telepsychiatry service. We do live psychiatric interviews and provide consultation for these patients who are referred by medical staff."

The telepsychiatry service was piloted by Al-Nuaimi in 2013, based loosely on the previous efforts of Maher Saqqur, an Edmonton neurologist and Faculty of Medicine & Dentistry member who uses Skype to help Syrian patients. Since then, Al-Nuaimi's efforts have expanded to include six psychiatrists from across North America.

"Already we're more than what is in Syria," he says.

Though speaking to patients over the computer has challenges, the psychiatry resident says the program has already proven its worth. He recounts the success he saw while treating a young Syrian girl who had suffered a gunshot wound to the head while playing on a swing. Both he and Saqqur treated the girl in person, and then later over Skype.

"She suffered mostly neurologic issues. She developed disturbed sleep patterns," says Al-Nuaimi. "With very simple medication and followup she did extremely well. She was able to walk and play, and we were able to follow her as well through Skype. Just seeing how she was doing was very, very, rewarding."

Within weeks, Al-Nuaimi's efforts will help lead to the opening of a new mental health facility in northern Syria. And although he admits the psychiatric help he can offer is just a drop in the bucket in comparison to the need in the country, he says it is the effort that counts.

"Just by being able to provide a very small service, at least we're providing something—because doing nothing will give you exactly that: nothing," says Al-Nuaimi. "By making that difference and being willing to see those patients and doing what needs to be done, it's going to motivate other people. And hopefully the people in Syria will start to see change."

Provided by University of Alberta

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