Oral Health Issues of Survivors of Torture

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Boston Center for Refugee Health and Human Rights
Definitions:

- **Immigrant:** lives in country other than country of origin.

- **Refugee:** an immigrant who cannot return to his or her country of origin because of persecution or the well-founded fear of persecution because of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. A refugee receives this status prior to entering the United States.
Definitions:

- **Asylum Seeker**: someone who claims to be a refugee.
  - An asylee applies for and receives this status after entering the United States.
At the start of 2004, the estimated number of people “of concern” to the UNHCR was 17 million (includes refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced people).

At the end of 2003, there were 985,500 (6%) asylum seekers in the world of which nearly 61,000 were seeking asylum in the U.S.
Boston Center for Refugee Health and Human Rights

- Founded in 1998

- Funding:
  - ORR (Office of Refugee Resettlement)
  - Torture Victims Relief Fund
  - United Nations Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture
Boston Center for Refugee Health and Human Rights

Mission

- Provide comprehensive health care for refugees and survivors of torture
- To educate and train agencies and professionals who serve these communities
- To conduct research
- To advocate for this vulnerable population
## Services Offered

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psychotherapy</th>
<th>Primary health care</th>
<th>English language</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psychopharm</td>
<td>Vocational rehabilitation</td>
<td>Legal services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social services</td>
<td>Dental care</td>
<td>Creative therapies Social group</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Services offered

- 300 clients/year
- 2900 patient visits/year
- 80 new patients/year
Demographics

- BCRHHR has provided services to over 700 clients
- 56% Female, 44% Male
- From 55 countries
Geographical Origin


AMERICAS: - Columbia, Cuba, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Nicaragua, Peru

EUROPE: - Albania, Armenia, Belarus, Bosnia, Croatia, Kosovo, Scotland, former Yugoslavia

ASIA & MIDDLE EAST: - Afghanistan, Burma, Chechnya, China, Iran, Iraq, Kyrgyzstan, Kurdistan, Lebanon, Nepal, Tibet, Turkey, Vietnam
Visa Status
n=502

- 299 Asylum Seekers
- 107 Refugees
- 38 Asylees
- 16 Unable to Clarify (HIPAA)
- 13 Other
- 22 US Citizenship
- 5 Voluntary Departure
- 1 Other
Results of Asylum Cases

n=299

Asylum Granted: 113
Pending/Unknown: 185
Denied: 1
Torture

- **United Nations Convention Against Torture, 1984:**
  - any act by which severe pain, physical or mental, intentionally inflicted.
  - Purpose: information, confession, punishing, intimidating, coercing, discrimination.

- Torture was practiced in 152 countries in 2001 (*Amnesty International*)
Prevalence of Torture
n=502

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Torture History</th>
<th>Family History of Torture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>462</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>315</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mechanisms of Torture

- Threat
- Rape/sexual trauma
- Beating
- Burning
- Stabbing
- Shackling
- Detention in prison
- Suspension
- Enslavement
- Forced witnessing of execution/rape of children/spouse/family members
## Medical conditions related to torture and ill treatment

- PTSD/Depression
- Chronic pain
- Somatic complaints (chest pain, headache, abdominal pain)
- Scars
- Anxiety

- Extremity trauma
- Falanga
- Head injuries – Neurological sequelae
- Sexual trauma
- HIV/AIDS
My role

- Friday morning all staff meeting.
- Referrals usually come from primary care physician, mental health provider or social worker.
  - Oral health screenings: using penlight and disposable mirror in the social workers office, or the conference room
  - Oral hygiene instructions using dental atlas’ & typodont
  - Toothbrush, toothpaste, floss given

- Referrals
- Case management
Points to remember:

- Asylees are undocumented, therefore seek free care for dental work.
- Ineligible for public benefits
- Most have never been to the dentist
What does dentistry have to do with aiding refugees and survivors of torture?

- Dental professionals are trained to recognize and respond to abuse and dental neglect in children, the disabled, and elders, situations that present unique behavioral and clinical considerations for the provision of dental care.
What does dentistry have to do with aiding refugees and survivors of torture?

- Survivors of torture frequently suffer malnutrition and direct trauma to the head, neck, mouth, and teeth.
Screening form

- Name, age, dob, gender
- Place of birth, language, translator
- Significant trauma history
- Significant medical history
- Contact info
- # of teeth, dentures, tobacco use
- Untreated cavities, cavity experience, dental decay
- Chart molars
- Perio/gingival index, calculus
- Oral pathology, tooth trauma
- Quality of life questions
- Treatment urgency
Demographics of dental clients

- 150 patients screened from 02/02 to 1/05
- Age distribution:
  - 7 months to 72 years
- 44% male and 56% female
Region of origin
n=150

- Africa: 80%
- Eastern Europe: 5%
- Indian Subcontinent: 6%
- Middle East: 3%
- South America: 1%
- South East Asia: 2%
- Caribbean: 3%
Last Dental Visit
n=137

Never > 5 yrs 2-5 yrs 1-2 yrs 6-12 mos < 6 mos
Pain
n=140

- Teeth: 25%
- Gums: 3%
- Other: 6%
- No Pain: 66%
Untreated Cavities
n=149

- Untreated Cavities: 73%
- No Untreated Cavities: 27%
Treatment Urgency
\(n=150\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Treatment Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Obvious Problem</td>
<td>Next regular check-up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Dental Care</td>
<td>Within several weeks: caries without signs/symptoms, spontaneous bleeding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urgent Care</td>
<td>Within 24 hours for pain, infection, swelling, soft tissue ulceration</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

More than 24 weeks
Toothbrush use in Country of Origin
n=122

- 18 clients used stick
- 2 still use stick
- Herb from river
- Salt rubbed with finger

Yes 93%
No 7%
Chewing sticks: timeless natural toothbrushes for oral cleansing.
Wu CD, Darout IA, Skaug N., Dept. of Periodontics, College of Dentistry, University Of Illinois at Chicago, 60612-7212, USA
Rituals and customs

- Male youths in Sudan, a symbolic passage into manhood is the ritualistic extraction of the lower central and lateral incisors.
- In some African cultures, signs of fluoride and non-fluoride enamel opacities are a source of pride.
- A tooth can also stand for power and its loss, for loss of power.
  - A lost tooth is buried so it does not get into the hands of the enemy who could use it to inflict harm.
Rituals and customs

- Typical ways to alleviate pain from toothache
  - battery acid
  - gasoline
  - MSG
  - pure perfume
  - tobacco
  - lemon juice

- The uvula is believed to put infants at risk for suffocation, hence is excised in many Ethiopians/Eritreans.
Missing Lower Anteriors
Missing teeth due to trauma
Treatment Considerations

Main treatment principals:

- To treat physical and psychological symptoms at the same time
- To secure the patient’s trust and confidence
- To respect the individual
- To avoid situations that remind the patient of the torture
- To inform carefully about examination
- Create an environment that is welcoming and non-traumatizing as possible.
Treatment considerations

- Examinations may cause acute emotional reactions or profound withdrawal.

- The typical dental exam may awaken a memory of physical and psychological torture to the head, face, mouth or teeth.

- A bright overhead light can bring forth a memory of forced sleep deprivation or interrogation.

- Questions about dental history and oral facial scars may elicit profound fear of being reported to government authorities.
Conclusion

- Addressing the oral health needs of survivors of torture contributes to their physical, mental, and social well-being.
- Exploring and sharing information about the needs of torture survivors bridges cultural gaps between patients, non-dental health and oral health professionals.
Thank you

Mural created by BCRHHR patients and staff.