Advocating for refugee care: the consultant paediatrician

Christian Harkensee talks to Marika Davies about supporting the health needs of asylum seekers through his child migrant and refugee clinic

Marika Davies

As a young adult in Germany, Christian Harkensee needed to complete two years of compulsory national service. Refusing to do military service on ethical grounds, he was given little choice about his placement as a nursing assistant in a local hospital. “At first I didn’t like it because it was very hard work for very little money,” he recalls. “But I started to enjoy talking to patients. I found that fascinating.”

Acting on the advice of the hospital’s matron he applied to study medicine and graduated from Humboldt University Berlin in 1997. A surplus of doctors in Germany prompted his move to the north east of England where he completed his paediatric training.

Harkensee, a consultant paediatrician at Queen Elizabeth Hospital, part of Gateshead Health NHS Foundation Trust, first became interested in humanitarian medicine as a student through volunteering and electives in Bolivia and Nicaragua. “I saw the health needs of people suffering diseases of poverty that were preventable, and a lack of healthcare,” he recalls.

In 2016 Harkensee began the first of several placements working in Syrian refugee camps around the Mediterranean. He was struck by the poor placements working in Syrian refugee camps around the Mediterranean. He was struck by the poor


conditions in which refugees lived and the difficulties they faced accessing medical care. “The crowded, unhygienic, and unsafe camp conditions traumatised people almost as much as their experience of conflict back home,” he says. “There is a lack of understanding of the health needs of these vulnerable people, and barriers to them accessing healthcare.”

Returning to the UK, Harkensee found that refugees in his local area were experiencing similar difficulties seeking medical care. “In Gateshead I came across refugee families who would attend emergency departments out of desperation,” he says. “They’re not registered with a GP, they don’t know how to use the healthcare system here because they don’t understand it, and they don’t speak the language.”

In 2018 he sought the agreement of his trust to convert one of his general paediatric clinics into a child migrant and refugee clinic and set about finding those who needed care. “Initially I had to build relations with the council’s housing department so they would provide us with information about when they were housing refugees,” he recalls. “Finding asylum seekers was far more difficult—unless they were registered with a GP and were referred, we would never hear of them.”

In the clinic Harkensee tries to tackle the barriers that his patients face in accessing healthcare, through collaboration with primary care, health screening, and using a one stop approach. “Refugee families often find it difficult to attend appointments and they might be moved to a different part of the country at short notice,” he explains. “We try to be as efficient as we can be in a single appointment, refer people to the right care, and provide them with good health records to enable their ongoing care.”

Harkensee advocates for refugees and campaigns locally to bring together charities and services on the topic of refugee health. “We need to highlight their needs. I keep raising my voice in advocacy wherever I can, and I find that at a local level I can achieve quite a lot,” he says. “I’ve tried to build a network and raise awareness and bring people together to create solutions.”

Harkensee is modest about the work that he does. “This is not about me doing something special, it’s about this extremely vulnerable and neglected group of people that no one really wants to touch,” he says. “I get deep inspiration and motivation from seeing how resilient and hopeful people can be, despite the massive challenges they face.”

Nominated by Nathaniel Aspray

“Chris is an example to me because of his tireless commitment to improving care for marginalised people. His vision to provide holistic healthcare to families of refugees, asylum seekers, and other vulnerable migrants is frankly inspiring. Whether making trips to the humanitarian setting or scrapping it out with funding bodies and managers in the UK, he goes above and beyond in trying to provide a service to some of the most excluded people in society.

“He has a gentle, methodical approach with patients; and in true paediatrician form, he has the ability to present as meticulous but still talk to children on a level that they can connect with.”

Nathaniel Aspray is a GP at Brambles Grange Medical Practice in Basingstoke and was formerly a GP in Gateshead.