

Researching services for survivors of torture and trauma



BY DEFINITION refugees have been dislocated from their country of origin due to a well-founded fear of persecution and have suffered the effects of war, torture, deprivation and violence. Sometimes these experiences are so overwhelming the effects linger when refugees arrive and settle in Australia. For some, direct services provided by agencies like The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture (Foundation House) help people recover and move on constructively with their lives.

However, there has been recent debate about the effectiveness of torture and trauma services in assisting refugees in their recovery. The problem is that very little research has comprehensively examined the subject of whether services are effective. Most of the existing studies have examined particular interventions for specific problems and only a handful have examined multidisciplinary treatment programs that cater for the broad range of difficulties survivors might experience.

Most of these studies have focussed on individual therapy models with adults. The evidence for working with children and families is particularly scant. The absence of empirical evidence has raised questions about which services are effective, when, and for whom.

In 2007, The RHRC and Foundation House initiated a research program that aims to address some of the questions raised and to begin building an evidence base about service effectiveness. Evaluating service effectiveness is

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challenging in part due to the nature of services delivered. Foundation House is complex, multidisciplinary service that responds flexibly to the needs of refugees. It is a state-wide service that assists some 3000 clients each year representing over 30 different countries of origin. Clients receive a combination of services that might include counselling and advocacy, group work and complementary therapies. Services are offered to children, adolescents and adults who may be seen individually or as families.

In evaluating complex services like Foundation House, several methodological challenges arise that are to some extent mirrored in the general discussion about evidence based practice amongst other mental health service providers. For example, there has been an historical reliance on randomised controlled trials as the gold standard of evidence for

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SERVICE PROVIDER PERSPECTIVE

Reflections on the changes clients experience with direct service contact:

"With a client I am seeing right now there is the great loss, how people are coping with the loss of family members and also family members that are in danger overseas.

"I have noticed with many women that we have worked with for example, going through lots of anxiety and depression, grieving for losses.

"So talking through some of those issues they can actually start seeing for themselves those things that are happening for them, so they can actually start discussing them and

perhaps working out through that process what they can do about it.

"I think that when we work with clients in particular our work is trying to ...for people to start identifying some hope in their lives and I think that what people are expressing when they have finished the session with me they say I feel so light and I feel like I can go on you know. So I think that for them to start identifying that there is hope in their lives.

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treatment effectiveness that is now being challenged. The American Psychological Society (APA) recently established a Presidential Task Force on Evidence Based Practice (2005) to define the issues. Difficulties arise because clinical trials are often divorced from natural service delivery settings. Some controlled trials with refugee groups are similarly disconnected from the philosophy and setting of specialist torture and trauma services. The APA raises concern that such evidence may be misused as a justification for inappropriately restricting treatment choices, noting that interventions not

tested in this manner should not be assumed to be ineffective. Moreover, researching services for diverse refugee communities also brings added methodological challenges around assessing cross-cultural components of the work (e.g. etic versus emic approaches).

In relation to the above dilemmas and opportunities the RHRC and Foundation House are implementing a pre-evaluation study that aims to reach agreement about recovery outcomes for clients. Representing the diversity at Foundation House, service providers and clients will be asked for their perspectives on what the service delivers.

Client outcomes will be identified across programs for adults, children, teens and families from different ethnic backgrounds. Taking a qualitative approach will allow the development of measurable indicators that are relevant to both the service and its clients. This will in turn allow future evaluation of the effectiveness of direct services to take place. We hope that by undertaking a thorough evaluation we can improve the quality of the services delivered to our clients and demonstrate the effectiveness of multidisciplinary programs for survivors of torture and trauma.

RECOMMENDED READING

- American Psychological Association. (2005). Report of the 2005 Presidential Task Force on evidence-based practice: American Psychological Association.
- Basoglu, M. (2006). Rehabilitation of traumatised refugees and survivors of torture. *British Medical Journal*, 333, 1230-1231.
- Carlsson, J.M., Olsen, D.R., Mortensen, E.L. & Kastrup, M (2006) Mental Health and Health-Related Quality of Life: A 10-Year Follow-Up of Tortured Refugees. *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 194: 725-731

A MESSAGE FROM THE DEPUTY DIRECTOR

THIS ISSUE of our newsletter focuses on the research program initiated by the RHRC and Foundation House aiming at building an evidence base about torture and trauma service effectiveness. This program of research, with all its challenges, is a very important and timely step towards addressing the existing gap in empirical evidence related to the impact that specialist services have on the recovery of survivors of

torture and trauma. A key challenge is the conceptualisation of recovery from torture and trauma beyond the traditional outcomes of PTSD, anxiety and depression. What other outcomes can we assess as part of the recovery process? Are we asking the right questions? As a first step, a current pre-evaluation



study is aiming at gaining a deeper understanding of what the recovery outcomes are from the perspective of both refugee clients and service providers.

This exciting research program is also another demonstration of the benefits of collaborative work between an academic institution (RHRC at La Trobe

University) and a community-based specialist service provider (Foundation House). Since late 2003, when the RHRC was launched, our partnership with Foundation House has shown how applied research can both inform and be informed by service delivery. We look forward to strengthening this valuable partnership.

— Dr Ignacio Correa-Velez,
Deputy Director &
NHMRC Postdoctoral
Research Fellow

Introducing... Colleen McFarlane

POSITION:

Research Fellow, Evidence Based Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma

QUALIFICATIONS:

Registered Psychologist

PhD, Clinical Psychology (Monash University)

BSc (Hons), Psychology (The University of Melbourne)

What led you to join the RHRC?

I joined the RHRC after completing my PhD and because of my work as a counsellor-advocate at Foundation House with survivors of torture and trauma. I was drawn to the opportunity to do research that produces clear evidence about the issues faced by refugees and their communities. At the RHRC different academic schools of thought are heard, allowing us to work in a rich environment of cross-disciplinary research that responds well to the needs of refugees. The idea of being able to influence policy and practice is also appealing and important.

What current projects are you working on?

I am employed in a program of research that aims to evaluate the effectiveness of direct services provided by Foundation House to survivors of torture and trauma. Very little research has examined services for survivors of torture and trauma and we hope to develop a comprehensive evidence base for informing best practice. At the moment I am working on a project that will identify what the recovery outcomes are for clients who have received direct services.

What is your main motivation for pursuing research in this area?



I originally became involved in refugee work because of my interests in different cultures, human rights and psychological trauma. I'm interested in improving understanding and practices about how mental health workers can best respond to refugees and the problems they face.

What research areas are you interested in pursuing in the future?

There are so many! I'm interested in exploring cross-

cultural aspects of mental health and therapeutic work with survivors of torture and trauma. This is a broad area and refugees face a range of problems that are often fairly unique to their circumstances. Tailored therapeutic approaches assisting them with these difficulties have been largely under-researched.

Subsequently there is very little empirical evidence about best practice for working with survivors to overcome torture and trauma.

POLICY CORNER

Government announces review of Citizenship Test

THE FEDERAL Government has appointed an independent committee to conduct a review of the Australian citizenship test which was introduced on 1 October 2007. The review will consider whether the citizenship test can be improved, in either its content or operation. It will take into account the experiences of applicants, the impact of the test on citizenship applications and any other issues related to the test.

Refugee and humanitarian entrants have historically had the highest uptake of

citizenship compared to other visa categories. When the Howard Government was considering introducing a citizenship test, the Forum of Australian Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma (FASSTT) expressed concern that such a test could deter Humanitarian entrants from applying for citizenship – a status which provides a sense of stability and security that assists our clients in permanent settlement. We also expressed concern that a written, computer-administered test would present a significant barrier to those with a history of

trauma (which can have an impact on learning) and limited literacy, education, and computer skills.

Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) figures¹ show Humanitarian entrants still have a disproportionately high application rate for citizenship. However, under the new test, they also have a disproportionately high failure rate (18% of Humanitarian entrants who sit the test fail it on first or subsequent attempts, compared to only 1% of skill stream applicants and 9% of family stream applicants).

Through the Citizenship Review, FASSTT will call on the Government to ensure that Humanitarian entrants are not unfairly disadvantaged due to either the operation or the content of the test.

Contributed by the Forum of Australian Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma (www.fasstt.org.au)

1. Department of Immigration and Citizenship, *Australian Citizenship Test: Snapshot Report*, April 2008 (available at http://www.citizenship.gov.au/_pdf/citztest-snapshot-report-2008-april.pdf)

Centre News

THE Brisbane-based NHMRC funded project *Talking the walk: A longitudinal study of refugee men's health and resettlement* (SettleMEN Project) started in February 2008. The RHRC welcomes the team of Research Assistants: Sabah Al Ansari, Kiza Omar Augustin, Mark Deng Garang, Jongkuch Achieu Kur, Stephen Sayid Yanga, Lawrence Massaquoi, Wilson Paito Oyat, Baptist Joe Oyot, and Suan Muan Thang. They completed their initial training on Research Ethics and Interviewing Skills and have started recruiting

participants. The project is investigating, over a 2-year period, the health and resettlement experiences of 242 recently arrived adult men from refugee backgrounds living in Brisbane and Toowoomba.

- Amber McQueen (BA Hons) joined the *Good Starts Arts* project in February 2008. She has taken on the role of Research Officer in the project in which young people from refugee backgrounds are working with community artists and researchers to explore their experiences of resettlement.
- The 2008 RHRC Seminar Series is underway and *How Best to Remove Failed Asylum Seekers: Australian and*

International Practice will be presented by John Gibson, President of the Refugee Council of Victoria, Member of the Victorian Bar and Specialist Practitioner in Refugee and Migration Law. June 25, 5:30pm at Foundation House, Brunswick. Check the RHRC website for details.

- Two films produced by *Good Starts Arts*, "See Through Me: Discrimination through the eyes of ten young Somali-Australians" and "Crazy: The everyday experiences of Sudanese-Australian young women", are now available to view online at http://www.latrobe.edu.au/rhrc/goodstarts_arts.html.

PUBLICATIONS

- Correa-Velez I, Johnston V, Kirk J and Ferdinand A. Community-based asylum seekers' use of primary care services in Melbourne. *Medical Journal of Australia*, 2008; 188: 344-348.
- Our latest research policy broadsheet focuses on newly arrived refugee communities and driving. This and our previous broadsheets can be accessed on the RHRC website.
- Our 2007 Annual Report is now complete and can be accessed on the RHRC website.

Pathways to understanding: Somali community, family and youth in Australia

THIS ONE-DAY Symposium was held at La Trobe University on March 14, 2008 and was hosted by the RHRC and the Centre for Dialogue. It featured a diverse range of speakers from La Trobe University, Spectrum Migrant Resource Centre, Adult Multicultural Education Service (AMES) and the Carlton Legal Agencies Network. A panel of young people from the Somali Community also

answered questions and discussed important issues facing the Somali Community in Australia. Topics covered civil war and the refugee experience, intergenerational issues, youth and education, intercultural encounters, employment and health. Those attending included professionals from community and government sectors, students and academics, all contributing to valuable discussion. La



Trobe University PhD Candidate Yusuf Sheikh Omar coordinated the event and set the tone for the day with this Somali proverb;



"geyi am geed aadan aqoonin midna geyaan kuma siiyo" ('Neither the land nor the tree that you don't affiliate with give you shelter').

Researching Refugee Health

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