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Subject Mater and nib foundation connect refugees to health care

In response to Brisbane's growing refugee population, and an unmet community need, Mater has launched a 'Refugee Women as Health Leaders' program to assist the hundreds of refugee women and families living in the inner and outer South Brisbane district.

The two year program will train eight refugee women as skilled health leaders - 'natural helpers' - within their own communities to act as a link between refugees and the health system. They will provide additional community-based advice and health literacy support working alongside health care professionals.

One health leader, Angelina Mujawamariya from Rwanda finds members of her community often come to her with their health issues.

"They seem more comfortable with someone from their own community and through this project I hope to be able to provide appropriate responses and work with the community to achieve better health outcomes," Angelina said.

Angelina currently works at the Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland as a sexual health worker and at the Multicultural Development Association as a cultural support worker to provide cultural advice and support to case managers settling newly-arrived families from Rwanda.

The 'Refugee Women as Health Leaders' program will see the women spend three months training followed by three months actively helping refugees in the community. An evaluation will take place in September when the 2012 program finishes with another four women trained next year.

Mater Health Services Refugee Health Leader Project Manager Paula Peterson said, "Refugees are used to non-existent or little healthcare in third world countries where they mostly ask for advice from family and community before they go to the doctor. It is those family and community members that we want to support and help them understand they can expect assistance from our health services."

The health and wellbeing of people of a refugee background is a crucial part of their successful settlement. Sadly, health outcomes among refugee communities in Australia are typically poor.

"Mater research suggests refugees experience lower access to health care, lower quality of care and poorer health status. What's more, lack of understanding, cultural and language barriers mean that refugees often fail to take an active role in their own health care," Paula said.

"The complexity of a refugee's health care needs often stem from experiences of war-related trauma, torture or long term settlement in refugee camps—sometimes for more than ten years—with a lack of health care."

Brisbane currently receives approximately 2000 refugees each year. Brisbane City Council research indicates that "the greatest numbers of newly arrived refugees tend to congregate in the south-east area of the city—Stones Corner, Greenslopes, Annerley, Yeronga and Moorooka. More established communities tend to live in the outer south-west—Carole Park, Inala, Darra" (BCC Working with Refugees Strategy, 2002). Due to the proximity of these areas to Mater Health Services, Mater has responded with the program to address the health needs of refugees.

The project is funded by the nib foundation and Mater Foundation and is managed by the Mater UQ Centre for Primary Health Innovation in partnership with the Multicultural Development Association. The health leaders will be advised by a reference group of people drawn from Mater Health Services, general practice, refugee communities, universities and relevant agencies.

nib foundation Chairman Terry Lawler said with health and wellbeing playing a crucial role in the settlement of refugees, the program aims to make the transition to life in Australia easier.

"We believe that the training of these women as health leaders in their own communities will lead to improved health literacy and enhanced access to basic health services for refugee families living in Brisbane," Mr Lawler said.

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