

## Improving mental health care in Syria

### How do you improve the skills of mental health workers in war-torn Syria? And what is their role in helping young Syrians build a better future?



They were two of the topics psychiatrists and other mental health professionals were discussing in Istanbul earlier this month at a conference arranged by the Syrian Association for Mental Health (SAMH) in co-operation with the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS).

Below, RCPsych Fellow Dr Nadim Almoshmosh reports on this important event, and highlights the vital role of psychiatry and mental health care in a country engulfed in catastrophe.

#### Dr Almoshmosh's report from the conference

The conference on 5-6<sup>th</sup> May, arranged in cooperation with Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS), had the theme "Moving from crisis response to sustainable services".

More than 150 professionals from various disciplines, mainly based in Turkey and work closely with Syrian refugees.

The overall objectives of the conference were:

1. Review and updates on the status of mental health needs of refugees.
2. Highlight the need and challenges of developing sustainable psychological services for Syrians.
3. Enhance skills and knowledge of workers in the mental health field.
4. Address the role of mental health workers in dealing with challenges faced by the young Syrian generation.
5. Provide a framework in addressing the ethical and legal aspects when providing mental health care for Syrian refugees.

Over 40 lecturers and trainers took part in delivering briefs, seminars and workshops. Prominent speakers gave inspiring talks to cover the objectives including Prof M About Saleh and Prof V Sharma workshop exploring the use of Global Mental Health Assessment Tool training in addressing the needs.

Prof T Wenzel talked about the medical and psychiatric documentations of sequels to violence in the Syrian conflict. Prof U Korkmazlar highlighted the use of EMDR for affected Syrian refugees in Turkey.

This was followed up by an expert brief delivered by Sian Morgan, founder of Trauma Aid-UK, on EMDR training to support mental health professionals in healing the impact of trauma in areas of conflict.

Mrs Morgan has been instrumental along with Royal College members Dr K Sultan and W Abdulhamid in delivering training of EMDR for Syrian and other Arab professionals in the last few years.

So far 90 have completed their EMDR training and are in the process of getting their accreditation as therapists. This will help in the capacity building so more therapists will be available to help alleviate some of suffering of Syrian trauma survivors.

The conference also highlighted the maladaptive behaviours some people do at times of conflict including substance misuses and increase tobacco smoking. Prof K Ogel gave a brief introduction in addiction problems followed up by possible ways to prevent it and manage it.

A workshop on the ethical and legal aspects faced by mental health workers with Syrian refugees and the possible overlap between them were explored. Dr M Aljundi and colleagues have worked tirelessly on trying to address this often difficult subject and has produced a Code of Ethics for mental health practitioners working with Syrians.

Various other talks explored sustainable psychiatric healthcare for Syrians and ways to implement them in collaboration with local services. Issues related to refugee mental health and acculturation problems in Turkey and other mental and behaviour problems of Syrian refugees in Germany were also discussed.

Solution focus brief therapy, trauma focused therapy, CBT approach and EMDR presented as various approaches to help cover the needs.

The use of Tele-mental health and reviewing various group attempts on this including distant supervision were explored.

This can be an invaluable method of help and the recommendation for its use is to be done when clear guidance is identified linking with local professionals and resources with the understanding of its possible limitations.

The Syrian situation is catastrophic and one Syrian neuropsychologist Prof K Hamza has coined a "Human Devastation Syndrome" to describe the 'unique, unprecedented trauma' of Syrian crisis on children. PTSD feels insufficient to describe their state as their devastation is above and beyond what even soldiers are able to see in war.

The Syrian crisis, suffering and uprooting continue with huge psychological consequences on civilians. Syrian mental health professionals and other sympathisers will continue to offer their support and attempt to alleviate some of this suffering.

#### Dr Nadim Almoshmosh, FRCPsych

[Back to eNewsletter](#)

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- Website feedback
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