

## **VOLUNTEERS AT AN ISRAELI MEDICAL CLINIC**

### **Services provided at mobile medical clinics by Physicians for Human Rights-Israel (PH) to serve residents of the West Bank**

**Project leader:** Associate professor of public health medicine Kjell Reichenberg, specialist in community medicine, pediatrics and child psychiatry. Certified psychotherapist.

**Background:** Physicians for Human Rights-Israel (PH) was founded in 1988 to promote the right to health at the time of the first major Palestinian uprising on the West Bank. The organization later evolved to also include safeguarding the health of groups within Israel's borders and to simultaneously cooperate on some fronts with Israeli authorities in the field of public health (1).

In 1989 a Mobile Clinic service was launched consisting of voluntary medical and healthcare teams who along with Palestinian colleagues established temporary Saturday clinics in schools or other facilities on the West Bank. Palestinians and other patients may seek care for their illnesses and also receive consultancy services within prenatal and pediatric care. In certain cases, these mobile clinics have also offered advanced medical care in Gaza (2). An example of a typical day in the clinic is a Saturday in January 2019 when a team of 8 doctors, 4 nurses and 7 other coworkers examined and treated or offered advice to 210 patients, including 25 children. That day is described on the website <https://www.phr.org.il/en/january-2019-832-patients-examined-during-mobile-clinic-activity-in-the-west-bank/?pr=47>.

In 1999 a clinic opened in southern Tel Aviv to provide medical services to undocumented workers. This "Open Clinic" has expanded its coverage and is now open 5 days a week. People from northeastern Africa predominate among patients seeking care at the clinic. PHRI staff includes both paid employees and a large number of volunteers (3).

PHRI has multiple functions. In addition to the aforementioned mobile units and the medical clinic for refugees in Tel Aviv, PHRI is a political advocacy group working to promote the right to medical care for everyone in Israel and for a just asylum-seeking process. The organization also provides expertise to the Israeli government and in some regards relieves the government of certain responsibilities of providing health and medical care to the many undocumented workers living in Israel. In 2010 the organization received the Right Livelihood Award, also known as the alternative Nobel prize.

PHRI shares many similarities with the Rosengrenska Foundation in Gothenburg, in which I have been active as a volunteer doctor for over 15 years. Rosengrenska provides 1) a healthcare referral service where undocumented refugees receive advice on how their medical needs can be met, 2) limited in-house treatment for medical and mental issues, 3) financial aid in cooperation with the Church of Sweden, especially for families with children without a valid residence permit, and 4) expertise to authorities, universities and other organizations, while also 5) serving as an advocacy group for the right of the undocumented to receive medical care (4). Foundation employees conduct research on the circumstances of the undocumented (5). -- However, PHRI is a considerably larger organization with extensive operations and a vast amount of experience from which to draw.

In many regions of Europe, volunteer organizations have assumed duties that were previously under the auspices and management of publicly financed bodies. By assuming some of the financial responsibility for social and medical services, volunteer organizations have had greater leeway to determine the objectives and structure of their development aid. The lack of opportunity for self-reflection among volunteers has contributed to a perception of personal failure, confusion concerning services and occasional uncertainty regarding political issues (1, 6, 7). For example, at one of the medical clinics for undocumented individuals in Berlin, MediBüro, which I personally visited, there were contradictory perceptions concerning cooperation with refugee organizations and government authorities (6).

Research is underway on how doctors and nurses in Sweden who regularly donate their time to work as medical volunteers perceive their contribution in terms of benefit for others, personal satisfaction and growth of understanding, an opportunity to share experiences with colleagues in a cohesive team and as an expression of a political position or philosophical commitment (8). The foundation of this work needs to be enhanced by, for example, experiences from Israel, where both advances in clinical services and academic research in the field can be found (1, 3). Other than in Israel and Germany, research is scarce concerning medical aid that also involves political advocacy issues. The mobile medical clinic services that PHRI provides on the West Bank are a good example of an operation that could promote such development of understanding.

**Question:** What are the motives cited by volunteers for participating in the mobile clinic? What experiences have participants gained? What potential misgivings related to this type of activity might participating volunteers have?

**Method:** Researchers from Sweden will participate as observers of operations at the mobile clinic. Individual interviews of volunteers will be conducted using open questions with analysis according to the tradition of grounded theory.

**Practical design:** A first series of interviews will be conducted by Hannah Dolata, a medical student at Sahlgrenska Academy, University of Gothenburg, with on-site and online supervision by the project supervisor. This first series of interviews will be presented as the student's degree project as required by the curriculum in term 10. Continued interviews will be carried out by the project leader, hopefully together with additional medical students. Collaboration and advice will be provided by Professor Nadav Davidovitch, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, who is a volunteer doctor at PHRI and researcher on the humanitarian and political aspects of medical aid. – The management of Physicians for Human Rights Israel, via the head of operations, Salah Hay Yahya, has welcomed our participation in the work of the mobile clinic and in conducting interviews with volunteer doctors. Mathilda Jerenius, resource developer at PHRI, will help in recruiting research participants and coordinating the research project.

**Ethical questions:** The study observes the usual approach including anonymization and the opportunity for interviewees to withdraw from the study. Ethical approval will be obtained in Israel through the research ethics committee at the PHRI. No research ethics review is required for the student report, but an application will be submitted for permission from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority to allow for publication of the entire study.

**Planned project timetable and report:** This study will be carried out between September 1, 2019 and December 31, 2020. The first step in the report will be medical student Hannah Dolata's degree project in the fall term of 2019. The study will be presented in a scientific periodical in 2020-2021. The hope is that additional students will be able to complete other portions of the study as part of the requirements for their medical degree.

**Intended results and relevance of the proposed study:**

- 1) Increase understanding of the motives, experiences and possible reactions/misgivings associated with medical and social volunteer work that has an inherent political and philosophical bent.
- 2) Provide inspiration for content in undergraduate and continuing education for doctors, nurses and related personnel.
- 3) Broaden the foundation for guided reflection by doctors, psychologists, nurses and others who treat patients in difficult circumstances. In this latter type of continuing education, the project leader assumes the role of supervisor.
- 4) In terms of research, the study may increase the basic understanding of non-profit work and enable research on what happens when volunteers choose to terminate their participation.

**Expertise and qualifications related to the project:** As project leader, I have years of personal experience of the type of volunteer work as a doctor that the study will investigate. I have conducted my own study on the reactions of Swedish volunteer doctors who staff clinics for undocumented individuals. Through my visits and participation providing services in 2010, 2012 and 2017, I am well-acquainted with operations conducted by Physicians for Human Rights Israel.

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