Fact Sheet 3:  
Asylum Seekers

While most refugees in Australia are selected for resettlement from overseas, some arrive as asylum seekers. Asylum seekers are people who apply to the government for recognition as a refugee because they fear being persecuted in their own country. If they are found to be refugees, Australia is obliged to protect them under international law.

In Australia asylum seekers form two groups:

♦ those that arrived with a valid visa are allowed to live in the community whilst their applications are processed; or
♦ those who arrived without a visa (by either plane or boat) are generally placed in detention centres until they are either granted a visa to remain, or they leave the country (voluntarily or otherwise).

Since 2005, asylum seeker children and their families are placed in a form of detention in the community.

Health care in detention centres is the responsibility of the company contracted by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship to manage the centres. This fact sheet will focus on health issues for asylum seekers living in the community.

Health screening for asylum seekers in the community

The Australian Government requires all applicants for a permanent visa, including asylum seekers, to undergo a medical examination, a chest x-ray if 11 years of age or older and an HIV test if 15 years of age or older. Other tests may be ordered as required. These tests relate primarily to the migration process, rather than an individual’s personal health.

Consider a full health assessment, taking into account tests already done

Main health concerns

Like persons already classified as refugees, asylum seekers fleeing persecution and human rights abuses may have suffered psychological trauma, deprivation, torture and/or poor access to health care. Some asylum seekers have also taken extreme risks in their attempts to reach safety.

Health problems commonly identified amongst community-based asylum seekers in Sydney (Harris & Telfer, 2001) include:

• psychological disorders (eg depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder)
• musculo-skeletal problems (eg result of injury or torture)
• gastro-intestinal disorders
• hypertension & heart disease
• women’s health issues
• dental problems.

Later research with asylum seekers in Melbourne supported these findings (Correa-Velez I, Johnston V, Kirk J, Ferdinand A et al, 2008).

Ongoing stressors whilst awaiting the outcome of their claim for asylum include: fear of being returned to their country of origin, unemployment, limited English language skills, lack of money, separation from family, and isolation. Asylum seekers may also be fearful of using government services.

Be prepared for fragmented information as a result of anxiety or trauma, or lack of trust.

Access to public health services

Following changes to federal legislation in 2009, an increasing proportion of asylum seekers living in the community in NSW

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have access to Medicare. As of October 2009, those that aren’t Medicare-eligible can have their fees waived for some public health services in NSW. These services are:

- emergency care for acute medical and surgical conditions, including admission
- some elective surgery (for conditions listed as Clinical Priority Categories 1 & 2)
- ambulatory and outpatient care required to maintain health status of asylum seekers with acute and chronic health conditions (eg diabetes)
- maternity services, including delivery, and ante and post natal care
- mental health services (inpatient and community based).

Some health service staff may be unaware that a fee waiver applies and may ask for up-front payment, or seek to recover costs for admission or treatment.

When making referrals to a public health service, ensure that the patient & the staff of the relevant service are aware if a fee waiver applies

Access to private health services

Asylum seekers have very limited access to private health services such as physiotherapy and specialists, even if they have Medicare, due to financial constraints. Asylum seekers are not entitled to Centrelink benefits, and those without Medicare are also not entitled to work.

Asylum seekers are ineligible for a Health Care Card so cannot access subsidised medications. Those without Medicare pay even more for medicines.

The only financial support available to asylum seekers from the government is the Asylum Seekers Assistance Scheme (ASAS), which is available to some asylum seekers experiencing extreme financial hardship.

Consider referring to public outpatient clinics for specialist review. Asylum seekers are unlikely to be able to afford private pathology, x-ray or medication costs.

Services that assist asylum seekers

Options for asylum seekers who are Medicare ineligible, are unable to afford healthcare and are in need of medical treatment that is not covered by the fee-waiver, include:

- the Asylum Seekers Assistance Scheme: which can assist eligible people with general health care including pharmaceuticals and costs of visa medicals at Medibank Health Solutions. Contact Red Cross for eligibility criteria
- the Refugee Health Service: our clinics do not require Medicare cards, though referral options for those without Medicare are limited
- the Asylum Seekers Centre’s health clinic in Surry Hills
- certain GPs and health services that see people without Medicare (eg. STARTTS, chest clinics, sexual health clinics).

Contact RHS if you would like to join a register of doctors and dentists who provide occasional pro bono services to asylum seekers OR contact Red Cross ASAS if you would like to register to provide (paid) services to asylum seekers.

Relevant services for asylum seekers

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service (legal advice)</th>
<th>Contact</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asylum Seekers Centre</td>
<td>9361 5606</td>
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<tr>
<td>ASAS, NSW Red Cross</td>
<td>9229 4266</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House of Welcome</td>
<td>9727 9290</td>
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<tr>
<td>NSW Refugee Health Service</td>
<td>8778 0770</td>
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<tr>
<td>Service for the Treatment And Rehabilitation of Torture &amp; Trauma Survivors (STARTTS)</td>
<td>9794 1900</td>
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<tr>
<td>Refugee Advice &amp; Casework Service</td>
<td>9211 4001</td>
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Recommended readings


