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SURVEY FINDS TORTURE, WAR TRAUMA SURVIVORS FACE BARRIERS COMMUNICATING EXPERIENCES WITH DOCTORS

MINNEAPOLIS – Many refugees fleeing political conflict and violence are affected by their experiences but have not spoken to their doctors about them, according to a survey conducted by the Center for Victims of Torture (CVT). The refugees surveyed often did not see a connection between their mental and physical health, or did not see the benefit of discussing past traumatic experiences with their doctor.

“We know that survivors of torture and war trauma can recover from their experience but their physical and mental health needs must be addressed. Without a comprehensive approach, it will be more difficult for survivors to recover, support their families and contribute to their communities,” said Erin Mehta, CVT nurse and coauthor of the study.

The survey was conducted in early 2006 with 32 refugee patients in northwest Hennepin County, an area with a significant number of refugees from Liberia and other war torn countries.

Of the 72 percent who said they had not discussed past experiences with their doctors, many did not see health care extending to mental health. Often there was not an understanding that emotional and psychological concerns could affect a person’s health. Others expressed skepticism of the benefit of discussing the impact of the violence with their provider.

Sixty-six percent said their doctors never asked them about the political conflict in their country and ways they had been affected by it. Among those who were not asked, many felt it was not their place to raise the issue, but would respond if asked.

“In African cultures, doctors are highly regarded. People often feel it is a sign of respect to respond to a doctor’s questions, not raise questions,” said Garmai Quioh, L.P.N., a Liberian nurse with Park Nicollet Clinic-Minneapolis.

Of those whose doctors did raise the issue (12 individuals out of 32), about half indicated the doctor clearly and directly addressed mental health problems stemming from war trauma.

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Despite the reservations expressed about talking to their doctors, the majority of those surveyed said they would do so in order to receive the help they need for their health. Many surveyed immediately showed interest in learning about the impact of stress and trauma on their health.

Park Nicollet has invited CVT to provide training to clinicians and staff at its Brookdale clinic, where the survey was conducted. The training, funded by Park Nicollet Foundation, will help providers identify symptoms of stress and trauma and offer culturally-specific information. The foundation also is funding educational groups for patients at the clinic. The groups, led by CVT, will help patients identify and normalize war trauma symptoms, learn to promote health and healing and understand their role in communicating health concerns with their doctor.

“The results will help us to provide better information for our nurses and physicians and our patients,” said Michael Johnson, President, Park Nicollet Foundation. “In some cases, just raising awareness among our providers about the war experiences of our patients can improve their ability to treat and refer patients who are suffering from torture and war trauma.”

“It is not easy to talk about torture so the survey results are not surprising,” said Mehta. “We hope this study will spur discussion among health care providers. And we hope that they’ll follow Park Nicollet’s lead and look for ways to actively engage their patients who are victims of torture and to provide appropriate training and support to their staff that care for victims of torture.

A link to the full study can be found at www.cvt.org.

The study was part of a CVT initiative in Brooklyn Park and Brooklyn Center. CVT is working to create a network of refugees, educators and health and human service providers to watch for symptoms of trauma and help survivors access care. It is estimated that 20 percent of the combined population of Brooklyn Center and Brooklyn Park are refugees, up to 15 percent Liberian refugees, according to the Northwest Hennepin Human Services Council and Liberian organizations.

In addition to the Park Nicollet Foundation, funding for this initiative, called New Neighbors/Hidden Scars, comes from the Robins, Kaplan, Miller and Ciresi LLP Foundation for Education, Public Health and Social Justice, a supporting organization of The Minneapolis Foundation, the UCare Minnesota Fund Council of the Minnesota Medical Foundation, the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota Foundation, the Otto Bremer Foundation and Medica Foundation.

Founded in 1985, CVT is a nonprofit whose mission is to heal the wounds of torture on individuals, their families and their communities and to stop torture worldwide.

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