



City of Sanctuary Health Stream

Around the world, more people than ever are being forced to flee conflict and persecution to find safety and sanctuary elsewhere. On arrival, many asylum seekers and refugees are traumatised and may have developed a range of other health issues as a result of living in extreme circumstances for long periods of time before finding sanctuary in the UK.

Everyone, including asylum seekers and refugees, has the right to healthcare in the UK.

However, a range of barriers limit access to adequate healthcare and in particular, support for post-traumatic stress disorders, depression, anxiety and other mental health concerns.

Case Study

"Abdul", a vulnerable migrant from the Middle East living in Manchester was prevented from accessing a GP for his chronic asthma due to not being able to prove his immigration status. He tried to register with two Greater Manchester GP practices, but was unsuccessful, meaning he was without access to medication for some months. He experiences anxiety and insomnia brought on by the worry of not being able to get the medication he needs. Lack of access to preventative treatment could result in a serious deterioration in his breathing leading to possible emergency admissions, with higher costs to the NHS.

The City of Sanctuary network supports healthcare practitioners to provide welcoming, accessible and appropriate healthcare for asylum seekers and refugees. Our vision is for a healthcare system that nurtures a culture and practice of welcome for people seeking sanctuary, and that is better able to meet their needs through awareness of the barriers faced throughout the asylum and migration journey.



Health needs arising from experience of conflict or persecution are often exacerbated for asylum seekers by

- **a lack of control over their circumstances**
- **having no choice over where to live**
- **no right to work and subsequent impoverishment**
- **ongoing risk of detention and destitution at any point in the asylum process**
- **separation from culture, language, family and friends**

Asylum seekers and refugees are among the highest risk categories for suicide in the UK.

Many do not know how to navigate the NHS and there is widespread confusion within the refugee and asylum seeker community and among healthcare professionals about who is entitled to healthcare.

Case Study

"Femi", a refused asylum seeker living in England, went to hospital with heart problems. He had a scan, and was then discharged. After a month, he was sent a bill for this treatment. As a refused asylum seeker, he had no right to work and no access to benefits, so he could not pay the bill. Femi received another bill, and then a letter from a debt collector. Threatening letters in an unfamiliar language cause great distress and fear, especially to those who have fled from serious oppression in their homelands and who may already be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety. After receiving these bills, Femi did not access any other health care in case he was charged again.

In England, new laws on NHS charging in secondary care (e.g hospitals) affect people's confidence to access health services. Many vulnerable migrants are turned away from treatment they cannot afford to pay for. Sometimes asylum seekers and refugees are wrongfully charged, even though they're entitled to free care. Also, unlike elsewhere in the UK, in England refused asylum seekers are charged for treatment too.

To help address these challenges, there are lots of useful **resources on our website** for healthcare providers. We have also partnered with Doctors of the World UK and Asylum Matters to promote the Doctors of the World Safe Surgeries initiative and to support the campaign to end healthcare charging.



What are Safe Surgeries?

People seeking sanctuary face very real difficulties in registering with GP practices. They are often confronted with administrative barriers and a lack of understanding on the part of healthcare practitioners. Like everyone else, asylum seekers are fully entitled to free primary care.

A **Safe Surgery** can be any GP practice which commits to taking steps to tackle the barriers faced by many migrants in accessing healthcare. Safe Surgeries recognise barriers to healthcare access, particularly for migrants in vulnerable circumstances, and believe that small changes in practice make a difference. They are willing to lead by example and work to ensure that nobody in their community is excluded.

At a minimum, this means:

- **declaring the practice a 'Safe Surgery' for everyone**
- **ensuring that lack of ID or proof of address, immigration status or language are not barriers to patient registration**

A GP at one of the first Safe Surgeries explained what led them to sign up:

“One doesn't always know if certain patients are facing barriers [to healthcare] because you only see them in a clinical context. We need to make sure that as a practice, we aren't contributing to any of these barriers. Our concern is more with the patients that we aren't seeing and Safe Surgeries practices help us reach them.”

Doctors of the World UK have produced a range of user-friendly **resources** including a toolkit, a simple guide to NHS entitlement and translated patient facing posters. Where possible, they also offer training for clinical and nonclinical staff on migrants' entitlement to NHS care, common barriers and good practice to improve access. See bit.ly/safesurgeries for more information.

Safe Surgeries may also want to consider applying for a Surgery of Sanctuary Award (see overleaf).



What is a Health Service of Sanctuary Award?

The City of Sanctuary network recognises and celebrates healthcare providers, including GP practices, specialist clinics and hospitals, for their commitment to the values and vision of welcome and inclusivity. Local groups can award any healthcare provider who can provide evidence that they have followed our core principles:

- **Learn:** learning what it means to be seeking sanctuary; in general and particularly in the context of mental and physical healthcare needs
- **Embed:** taking positive action to embed concepts of welcome, safety and inclusion within the organisation
- **Share:** sharing your vision, achievements, what you have learned and good practice, with other healthcare practices

Any healthcare provider can apply for a Health Service of Sanctuary award, whether it be a (GP) Surgery of Sanctuary, Hospital of Sanctuary, Dentist of Sanctuary - the list goes on!

How can you get involved?

Check out the [resources on our website](#). Our **Mental Health Resource Pack**, developed with Freedom from Torture and Solace is an informative guide for developing an understanding of the asylum seeker journey and the key factors impacting on their health and well-being. Illustrated with case studies and vignettes, it is an essential tool for everyone who supports asylum seekers and refugees. We are seeking ways of taking this resource into primary and secondary healthcare settings.

Practical guides on navigating NHS charging and improving welcome in primary care can also be found on the Doctors of the World website bit.ly/safesurgeries.

For further information about the City of Sanctuary Health Stream, or to find out more about the Sanctuary Award, please visit our website health.cityofsanctuary.org or contact us via health@cityofsanctuary.org.

For more information about Doctors of the World UK, see doctorsoftheworld.org.uk.
If you work at a potential Safe Surgery, email safesurgeries@doctorsoftheworld.org.uk.

For more information on Asylum Matters please visit asylummatters.org.



City of Sanctuary

asylum matters

