

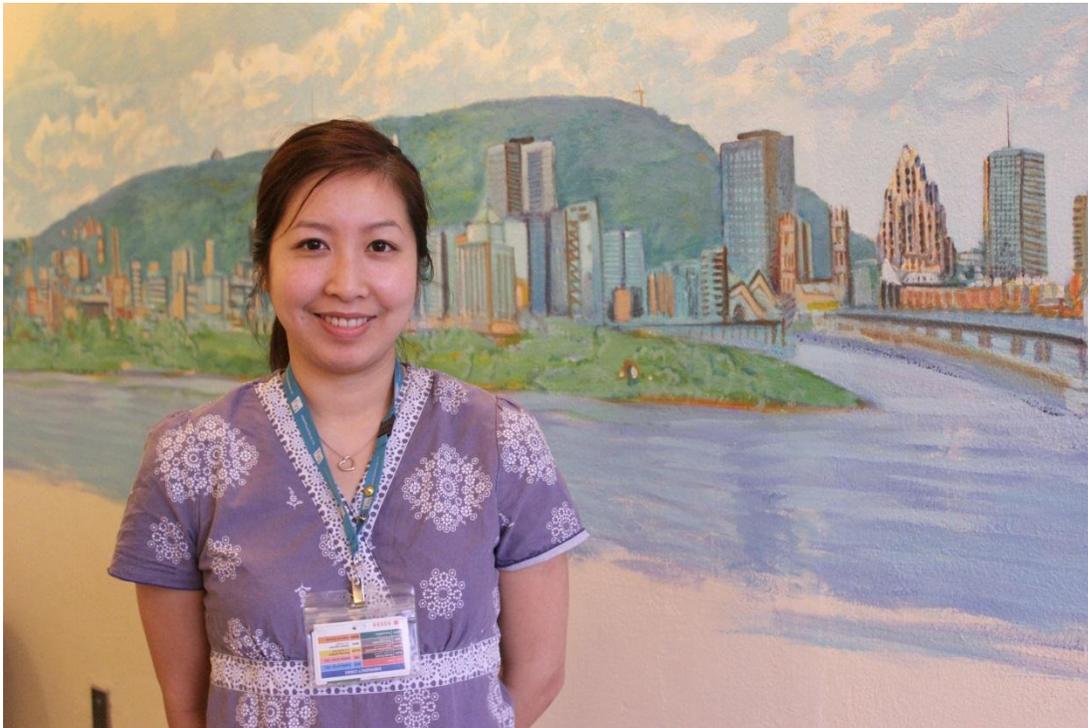
MUHC nurse and doctor who welcomed Syrian refugees talk about their experience

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By today, 25,000 Syrian refugees will have arrived in Canada fleeing their war-torn country. Around 7,300 of those will stay in Quebec. Chunip Koo, a clinician nurse at the Montreal Neurological Hospital of the McGill University Health Centre (MNH-MUHC), and Dr. Zinab Gouda, physician in the Transitional Care Team and Secondary Care division of the MUHC Department of Family Medicine, worked at the Health and Wellness Evaluation Clinic for incoming Syrian refugees, located in the Emergency Department of the Legacy Royal Victoria Hospital. Chunip also helped out at the Welcoming Centre near Pierre Elliott Trudeau–Montreal Airport.

Chunip and Dr. Gouda describe their experience.

Chunip Koo:



Why did you decide to take part in this initiative?

I've always wanted to practice in different environments, so when I heard on the news that the federal government would be accepting Syrian refugees, I immediately wanted to know how nurses would take part in the process.

You have worked at both clinics. What's the difference between them?

All refugees have a preliminary health evaluation before leaving for Canada. At the Welcoming Centre, we see families minutes after they get off the plane and offer first aid services to those who need them: some people have headaches, nausea. We're there to make sure there's no need for emergency care. At the refugee clinic, we evaluate the health and wellbeing of refugees within three days after they arrive in Canada. Since, all refugees must see a doctor within one month of their arrival, at the clinic we must determine if they need a visit sooner than that.

How do you evaluate them?

We take their vital signs and fill out a questionnaire about their health status; we treat them for minor illnesses, offer immunization and renew their prescriptions, if necessary. A social worker evaluates them for signs of post-traumatic stress disorder.

How was your contact with the families?

At the airport, you could tell they were tired and a bit sad. Many kids were crying. At the RVH clinic, on the other hand, people were less tired and seemed happier. Those who were sponsored were glad to be able to reconnect with their families here. They were all grateful we were there for them.

Was there anything that touched you in particular?

At the airport I saw a child who seemed to have mental health issues. He was the first to get off the plane and he was very agitated. The translator did a good job calming him down. The coordinators put the family first on the list for getting documentation and choosing appropriate winter clothing and sent them to a hotel so they could get some rest. I thought it was nice, because they helped those who had the most urgent needs first.

How valuable was this experience to you?

It was important. I learned to become more independent and use my own judgement more often. In the future, I would like to spend some time working in the North of Canada. Even though the clientele in the Refugee Clinic is different, the type of work we do as nurses in an environment with fewer resources is similar.

Dr. Zinab Gouda:



Six MUHC-affiliated family physicians offered to assist with medical coverage of the Syrian Refugee Evaluation Clinic, including Dr. Zinab Gouda, who responded without hesitation. "Dr. Gouda is an exemplary physician and human being whose competency and clinical skills are matched by her

compassionate care of patients," recounts Dr. Anita Brown Johnson, clinical director, Secondary Care Division and medical director, Transitional Care Service, Department of Family Medicine, who invited members of her team to participate. "Her experience working on the MUHC Transitional Care Service and co-managing patients admitted to the psycho-geriatric unit at the Douglas Mental Health University Institute, together with her fluency in Arabic and humanitarian qualities, made her the perfect candidate to welcome Syrian refugees to Quebec and Canada."

What was your role at the clinic?

When the patients first arrived at the clinic, they were seen by the nurse, who did the screening and triaging. Each patient's general physical and mental health was assessed and they underwent standard blood testing and infection screening. Their vaccination and medication needs were reviewed and updated, if needed and the nurse identified vulnerable patients, such as elderly, pregnant or diabetic patients, and directed patients who needed to be seen by the physician to me. I saw patients for a variety of reasons, from having prescriptions validated to looking after contraceptive and gynecological needs to providing referrals in more complex cases.

What kind of support did you received?

The Ministry and CIUSSS provided excellent guidelines and resources to evaluate the health and well-being of the Syrian refugees. All of the steps and requirements were clearly identified and well-organized in their official procedures, and they provided us with a list of pre-established resources and clinics that we could direct patients to, if required.

What are some of the challenges that you faced?

The Syrians need to be seen at the clinic within 72 hours of arrival in Canada, so we needed to be flexible. If their flights were delayed or changed, I had to reorganize my clinical schedule quickly to accommodate unforeseen delays. Dr. Anita Brown Johnson was instrumental in making it possible for me to continue in this role. She provided the support needed to schedule and reorganize clinics.

How has this experience affected you?

The Syrians are a very peaceful people who have survived the turmoil of a civil war. This has been very difficult on them. When they arrived at the clinic, I saw that many of the patients felt secure here in Canada, in Montreal. After all of their experiences, they are at peace here, I feel it in them. It is an unforgettable, one-of-a-kind experience to be a part of that.

To me, it is important to feel that we did something, that we offered something. We did not simply step away, we gave of ourselves. This gives me a strong sense of satisfaction and achievement.