

Wherever People Are, Hope Follows

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Men, women and children wait outside a building about 20 minutes away from central Athens. This is one of the seven polyclinics in Greece run by Doctors of the World / Medecins du Monde - Greece (MdM-Greece) and these people are all waiting to receive medical attention. In fact over 800 people travel to this location every month. MdM is a medical humanitarian organization founded in 1990 with 16 delegations around the world including Japan. This organization is based on the principles of basic human rights; that every human being has the right to humanitarian assistance, irrespective of gender, race, sexual orientation, religion, ideology or political belief. MdM-Greece provides healthcare and assistance and its beneficiaries include "the homeless, uninsured, migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, unaccompanied children, people who use drugs and every human being socially and financially excluded."



The hallway of the polyclinic is lined with seated people waiting for their appointment time to come so that they can meet with their doctor. As we enter the hallway that leads to the various examination rooms, an MdM-Greece staff member explains to doctors and patients that we are here to learn more about what is referred to as the refugee crisis and to witness the work done at this clinic. Despite the fact that we are intruding on a very sensitive and personal part of these people's lives, many people generously agrees to let us observe and take photos.



MdM-Greece's incredible work is made possible with the work of over 90 paid staff members and 500 volunteers comprised of physicians of various specialties, nurses, psychologists, social workers, clerical staff, and interpreters. The majority of the beneficiaries at this polyclinic are people who had to flee their homes as refugees, with the largest portion of them coming from Afghanistan, Syria, and Pakistan. This means that some beneficiaries require language assistance when communicating with the polyclinic staff. Kadeer is one of the interpreters who assists in communication using his trilingual skills; English, Greek, and Pashto. Kadeer was 18 years old when he made the perilous journey to the islands of Greece on a small boat from Afghanistan. Utilizing his English which he learned in Afghanistan, he has worked full time at MdM-Greece since 2003, helping others like himself to receive the medical care they deserve.



This two month-old baby and his parents were one of the many patients that the pediatrician examined on the day we visited the clinic. The parents traveled from Afghanistan to Turkey, then by boat to the Greek Island of Lesbos where they spent four months before finally arriving in Athens where they've lived for the past two years. Another family who also arrived in Athens about 2 years ago visits after the mom experienced chest pains. Her two daughters sit patiently in the examination room with worried expressions on their faces as she undergoes an ECG test. "At most hospitals, physicians only write prescriptions for medication," one of the pediatricians explained to us. "But here we do it a little differently. We give as much treatment or medication as we can directly to our patients, since many of them cannot afford to go to a pharmacy and purchase medication." Many of the beneficiaries that visit this polyclinic are unemployed, the most common reason being that they cannot speak Greek which makes finding work a challenge.



While Athens is known as a flourishing city full of many sightseeing spots, the area that the polyclinic is located in is not the safest neighborhood. Right nearby the clinic, MdM-Greece also operates a night shelter for the homeless. Aggeliki Mavrikou of the Volunteer & Fundraising Department of MdM-Greece explained to us how beneficiaries react to their stay at the shelter. "We provide the opportunity to sleep without fear. We provide the feeling of protection, a clean, calm, quiet place for people to rest their heads. Beneficiaries are extremely grateful just for having a safe place to sleep. They always want to give back. But we are only here to offer them services. The only thing we can receive from them are their emotions and their knowledge."



I visited this polyclinic with Peace Boat's 102nd Voyage web reporter Shiho Yuruki. Shiho is a professional photographer in Japan who is involved in raising awareness about disaster relief volunteerism. She first became involved in disaster relief about a year ago after Western Japan was flooded from heavy rainfall. She took part in the relief efforts and through this she learned about how disaster stricken areas in Japan were in dire need for more volunteers. After seeing that the media stopped reporting about the after-effects of this disaster, Shiho took action. She used her skills as a photographer to show that the relief efforts were far from over. She also chose to depict volunteers in a positive light, a reminder to those who saw her photos that anyone can play a role in helping. When we learned more about the state of refugees in Greece from Dr. Hara Tziouvara, President of the Board of MdM-Greece who came onboard Peace Boat's 102nd Voyage as a guest educator, we saw the similarities. Although the crisis is ongoing and is far from being resolved, we hear about it less and less as the media moves on to the newest, biggest stories. This is why Shiho and I wanted to visit MdM-Greece's polyclinic and bear witness to the incredible work conducted there, and to meet some of the beneficiaries. We are extremely grateful to Dr. Hara and many other staff members at the polyclinic in Athens who made our visit a reality.



By visiting this polyclinic and spending some time with staff members and beneficiaries, I have been encouraged to learn more. We were only able to stay for a few hours, but the time we spend was invaluable. I cannot begin to imagine what the people I met at this clinic have gone through in order to get where they are now. No one knows what it is like to be a refugee until they become one. Many lives have been lost while fleeing their countries and many families remain divided. Most people may never be able to return to their homes. I expected people's expressions to speak of the suffering they went through and the hardships to come. But many of the people we met had bright expressions. They were smiling. There was hope.



When I first started learning about the current state of refugees, I thought that maybe this was a problem in a far away land. I thought I wasn't equipped with the knowledge or skills to do anything about this issue. But I was wrong. This isn't a complicated issue. It's a human rights issue. It's simple. Everyone has the right to feel safe. Everyone has the right to receive healthcare. And everyone has the right to sleep soundly. No matter where we live, no matter what language we speak, these are core values that we all share. We may not speak a common tongue, but we can understand one another through these shared values.

I learned that there is always something we can do to help. And we must do something. This can be something as simple as talking about this issue with a friend or family member. Sometimes raising your voice and standing up for someone can be difficult, but it has the potential to have immeasurable impacts. When we only hear about these issues on a global scale, it can be hard to know where to begin. Start by researching the state of refugees in your country or region. Find out if there are organizations like MdM working to help people in your area. Find out what you can do to get involved. There is always a need for more volunteers and for more people who care. The more we learn about these issues, the more we raise our voices, the more actions we take, we increase the probability of implementing change.