Background

Human Rights Clinic (HRC) was founded at Highland Hospital in 2001 to provide primary care for survivors of torture living in Alameda County. The clinic’s scope was expanded in 2008 to include forensic documentation of torture for use in Federal Immigration Court proceedings. Since 2012 the clinic has been directed by Nick Nelson, a faculty member in the Division of Primary Care, and has expanded to two regular physicians and a total of seven clinician-evaluators. Most recently the clinic relocated to share space with the Refugee Clinic at the Eastmont Wellness Center, a separate AHS clinic which provides federally mandated health screening for incoming refugees.

Services

**Forensic Services:** Forensic medical and psychological evaluations are probably the most important service HRC provides, because they are very difficult to obtain in the community, quality is highly variable, and they often make a critical difference to the success of an asylum application. Physicians for Human Rights, a national organization which advocates for asylum seekers and trains physicians to evaluate them, reports that the average success rate of asylum applicants who have been evaluated by a physician is 86%, versus only 54% for those who have not. HRC’s evaluators use extended interviews and careful examination to produce high-quality reports. Since 2012 HRC evaluators have written more than 300 evaluations of asylum seekers who allege a history of torture or other forms of abuse. For patients whose case outcome is known, our success rate is >95%.

**Primary Care:** HRC retains its original mission to provide trauma-informed primary care to torture survivors. Patients are cared for in a friendly and welcoming environment by physicians trained to work with people who have been severely traumatized.

**Education and Outreach:** HRC staff are widely involved in education around immigrant health and asylum medicine within Highland, in other institutions, and in the community. Recent examples include a forensic asylum medicine training for clinicians at HGH in December which attracted 100 registrants and a had waiting list of 40 people, speaking and panel participation at a workshop of the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine on health-literacy approaches to immigrant health, training in recognition of torture sequelae and region-based screening for new arrivals for the Highland Emergency International interest group and Emergency Medicine Residency Program, extensive teaching throughout the Internal Medicine Residency Program curriculum, a workshop at a community event to support and protect immigrant families, a training for medical and physician assistant students at UCSF, and an appearance at The Commonwealth Club of California.

Additionally, HRC staff take their skills off-campus to do forensic evaluations on behalf of people seeking relief from deportation who are held in jails and other detention facilities by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and undertake outreach and advocacy activities in the community on behalf of
vulnerable immigrants including Op-Ed writing and outreach at events like the Día de los Muertos festival in the Fruitvale.

Research

HRC staff conduct research to better delineate epidemiology, patterns, and sequelae of torture among displaced people living in Bay Area communities. Ongoing research projects include a study of the prevalence of traumatic brain injury among torture survivors presenting to our clinic, and a geographical and technical analysis of locations and types of torture experienced by Eritrean asylum seekers in the East Bay. HRC is a member of the National Consortium of Torture Treatment Programs and staff will be presenting abstracts at this year’s national meeting in March in Washington, DC.

Media Appearances and Recognition

HRC has recently been featured on KTVU Channel 2 News, National Public Radio, Univision, and in La Opinión. In 2016 HRC was given the Exemplary Health Partner Award by the International Rescue Committee, a multinational NGO serving refugees and other displaced people.

Future Directions

HRC’s move to Eastmont represents an extraordinary opportunity to consolidate AHS’s services for displaced people living in Alameda County in a dedicated clinical space. Over the coming months we plan to work with Refugee Clinic Staff to integrate our clinics, share best practices, and leverage co-location to develop a regional center of excellence. In the immediate future we hope to secure grant funding to develop a welcoming, trauma-informed clinic which provides medical, forensic, and behavioral health services for asylum seekers, refugees, and other vulnerable immigrant populations in our community. Our long term plans include the foundation of a fellowship in Immigrant Health and Forensic Asylum Medicine, and the establishment of group therapy activities for specific groups with large populations in Oakland (for example, Mam-speaking indigenous Guatemalans and Eritrean veterans of forced conscription).

Conclusion

For seventeen years, AHS has supported a dedicated clinic for the care of torture survivors and asylum seekers. HRC has continued to improve and expand over this time, and we are poised to integrate services for displaced people across AHS and create a regionally unparalleled center of excellence in the care of displaced and traumatized people. With additional funding we hope to expand our number of clinic sessions and the variety of our services to address unmet needs and reduce our backlog, which averages around three months.

The services we provide are critical to the health of our extraordinarily diverse community, especially as federal policies towards all immigrants, and asylum seekers in particular, are becoming increasingly repressive.
Human Rights Clinic
History and Mission

- Founded 2001 by Thad Bordofsky (PC resident and faculty)
- Forensic Evaluation added 2006 by Amina Ahmed
- Weekly clinic 2012
- 2 MDs 2016
- 2018: 7 regular evaluators including pediatrics
- 2019: move to Eastmont Campus, avg. 10 sessions/month plus offsite.

Mission:
To serve as a medical home and provide forensic medical services for survivors of torture living in Alameda County
What We Do

- Trauma-informed primary care
- Develop guidelines and educate PCPs within AHS
- Training, teaching, and outreach at other institutions and in the community
- Forensic medical, psychological, and gynecological evaluations for survivors of torture
- Expert witness testimony in federal immigration court
- Unique in Northern California
Our Patients

- Eritrea
- Guatemala
- DRC
- Ethiopia
- Kenya
- Uganda
- El Salvador
- Nicaragua
- China
- Nepal
- Other
Outreach, Off-Campus, Education
Future Directions

- Grant Funding
- Integration with Eastmont Refugee Clinic
- Research
- Participation in National Organizations (Physicians for Human Rights, National Consortium of Torture Treatment Programs)
- Ongoing Outreach and Advocacy
Human Rights Clinic

DISCUSSION