

Health Needs of Undocumented Migrants and Main Barriers to Health Care

A Qualitative Study of Undocumented Migrants' Health Coverage in the Zurich Area

Corina Gross
July 2009

Master thesis submitted as part of the fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of the Master of Science in International Health
University of Basel, Switzerland
Swiss Tropical Institute, Basel, Switzerland
Supervisor: Bernadette Peterhans

SUMMARY

In January 2006, the medical humanitarian organisation Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) started Meditrina in Zurich, a medical project with the objective to facilitate access to health care for undocumented migrants. The connection between Meditrina and the here presented study is threefold: firstly, the project is a health services gateway, tailored to the needs of the population segment investigated here; secondly, the author herself is one of the nurses working for Meditrina; and thirdly, the interviewees in this study could be recruited from the pool of Meditrina clients.

The objective of the present study was to assess the health situation and needs of undocumented migrants in the Zurich area and to define recommendations for the improvement of health care of the target group. The study combines both a quantitative and a qualitative approach.

The findings reveal that the undocumented migrants using the services of Meditrina are a diverse group of persons that came to Switzerland less than five years ago and who receive little support from the integrated migrant resident population. The fear of police controls and of denunciation by medical institutions and others, the lack of information and financial means are the main barriers to the access of health care among the target group. A majority of the target group is not in a position to pay neither 2nd nor 3rd level care and/or the compulsory health insurance.

The interviewees consider health a decisive part of their human capital. Focal points were specific aspects of the needs of patients with respect to mental health, sexual and reproductive health, tuberculosis, and, with regards to HIV in particular, the financing of follow-up treatment for clients who tested seropositive.

In conclusion, the Meditrina project is considered to be an important "door opener" or gateway for a specific group of undocumented migrants to the existing (public) health care services. The study recommends a higher commitment of the health authorities, the provision of continuous information and the up-dating of stakeholders including the social environment of the target group. The cantonal authorities are requested to guarantee the financing of the health costs of destitute undocumented migrants without letting data protection be compromised. At the same time the right to take out a health insurance and to receive subsidies is to be maintained. In the light of preserving health the study furthermore recommends that the working ban during asylum procedure is revised and the access to health care for asylum seekers is evaluated, with focus on the continuity of care and the building of trust. Finally, the study requests an amendment of the decree on emergency assistance of the canton of Zurich, which is found not to be in compliance with the Swiss Federal Constitution.