Gimme Shelter

Refugee camps hold HIVers for years without treatment

December 1, 2003 By Carmen Retzlaff

A refugee camp in Africa called and said, 'We've got a pregnant woman with HIV and we've got to get her out of here now, while she can still travel,'" says Belinda Rochelle, of the Medical Case Management Program for Immigrant and Refugee Services of America (IRSA). Until 2000, HIVer refugees were barred from the U.S. (as are immigrants with HIV) unless they could pay for their health care. Then the U.S. instituted an HIV waiver, and some 600 HIVers have since come in under IRSA. But all U.S. refugee admissions have slowed dramatically since 9/11, and IRSA's funding was slashed this year.

Refugees usually wait several years in the overseas camps for immigration approval—even after they're certified as refugees by the United Nations. But an IRSA case manager shortened the process for that African mother-to-be, finding a Houston ASO to accept her as a client right away. The mom was able to get HIV meds so that her baby, born stateside, was HIV negative. Refugee workers say the chance of receiving HIV meds in the camps is roughly zero.

Bruce Gould, MD, treats HIV positive refugees at the Burgdorf Health Center in Hartford, Connecticut. He says providers should realize that "in certain populations, [HIVers] will not tell members of their community or have any support." The cultural and linguistic challenges of communicating the importance of adherence can complicate treatment. So can the trauma of violence and war, from which many refugees are escaping.

IRSA'S ROCHELLE ADVISES HIVER REFUGEES:

Find medical care as soon as possible, even if you don't feel or look sick—seeing a doctor now will help safeguard your future. (Call IRSA at 202.797.2105 for help finding a doc.)

Connect with other HIVers through an AIDS service organization (IRSA can help you locate one). A positive HIV test may feel like a death sentence overseas; meeting people here can help you see that you can live with HIV.

For more info: Refugees and advocates can contact Belinda Rochelle, IRSA Medical Case Management Program for Refugees, 1717 Mass. Ave,Suite 200, Washington, DC 20036, 202.797.2105, brochelle@irsa-uscr.org

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