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POLITICS IN THE EXAM ROOM: HOW OUR CURRENT POLITICAL CLIMATE IS AFFECTING THE MOST VULNERABLE PATIENTS

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In recent years, healthcare providers dedicated to social justice have seen their values challenged as offensive political rhetoric becomes common and legal precedents are attacked, sometimes on a daily basis. Physicians caring for immigrant populations are especially aware of the increasing hardships faced by individuals fleeing from conflict zones or human rights abuses. They have watched with dismay as changes in policies create misery and uncertainty for patients pursuing better health and a life protected from persecution.

The tradition of offering safety to refugees and asylum seekers, established in the aftermath of World War II,¹ embodies some of the most important tenets for which this country stands: respect for human rights and opportunity for individuals to build new lives free of the fear of violence and death. Implicit within that has been our national willingness to welcome and shelter less fortunate newcomers to this country. Obstacles to the collective acceptance of these individuals and integration of them into our heterogeneous society have been mounting. Simultaneously, widespread persecution of large populations has been forcing fear-based and trauma-induced flight and migration of greater numbers of people, resulting in a record number of refugees and asylum seekers worldwide. The subsector of those individuals “fortunate” enough to enter the United States while waiting for adjudication of their asylum cases encounter more delay in the process, often resulting in longer periods of time spent in bleak and dangerous detention facilities.

Physicians possess the unique skill sets, values and expertise to impart genuine positive impact for these marginalized populations.² Medical evaluation of an

asylum applicant, performed and documented by a trained examiner, significantly increases the likelihood that asylum will be granted.³ A larger number of trained medical evaluators could facilitate this process. In addition to seeking medical care, asylum seekers also present to physicians for difficult examinations of the physical and psychological scars that resulted from their prior persecution to create legal documentation in support of their asylum claim. While traumatized by the events that they have experienced, these individuals are also hopeful that the United States will offer security and new positive prospects. With extra training that builds upon skills physicians already possess, they can make a unique and substantial contribution to the legal appeal necessary for asylum seekers.

Refugees are on a pathway to citizenship when they arrive in the United States. Because of this, they do not have the same legal needs as asylum seekers do. Nonetheless, they have unique health concerns and require specific assessments when entering the United States to meet State Department requirements and to establish care as new members of society.⁴ They benefit from trauma-informed care to address ongoing medical problems as well as those illnesses seen more commonly in patients who have been persecuted, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, functional abdominal pain, and headaches. They are frequently adapting to lifestyles that are dramatically different from their home country, attempting to learn a new language, restarting professional identities, and learning how to operate in a new social system. With attunement to these needs, internists are

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well suited to care for this population and to assist as refugees become integrated into American life. On an individual basis, physicians often serve as trusted and stable contacts for refugees and asylum seekers within their new communities. These therapeutic relationships are critical. Sequelae of trauma, especially when not addressed, can continue to affect not only victims of atrocities but also subsequent generations of families and communities.

Whether it involves care in the exam room or physician advocacy, medicine as a profession possesses the unique combination of knowledge, authority, and stature to influence individual lives, public opinion, and policy in ways that carry important societal gravitas. It is time for us to mobilize individually and as a profession to employ our clinical acumen and public influence to impact lawmakers. We need to use our medical skills and empathy for these marginalized individuals to advocate on their behalf to members of society with the power to foster the political changes necessary for a lasting impact.⁵ Our country and our patients will benefit from action

in these problematic times.

The medical profession currently faces an evolving and growing challenge. There is a great need for increased capacity among physicians to be able to evaluate asylum seekers and to care for refugees. Likewise, there is a substantial need for physicians to recognize patients within their respective practices who have endured past trauma and who may be suffering from ongoing adverse ramifications of those experiences. Medicine historically has demonstrated the ability to adapt appropriately to the changing healthcare horizon, most importantly to the diverse patients and populations for whom we care. SGIM represents an ideal vehicle for all members to promote information dissemination, academic and professional collaboration, and future consultation. It provides an effective environment for connecting like-minded individuals and for creating a supportive network and community for ongoing efforts. The existing healthcare and political obstacles confronting refugees and asylum seekers are daunting, but certainly not insurmountable.

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