

Letter to the Editor

A Reflective Commentary of Nursing Migrants

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To the Editor,

Migration has been a common phenomenon throughout the ages. Greeks are renowned for their adventurous and often forced or dangerous ventures to faraway lands with its resultant diverse Greek Diaspora. This background awareness of the acceptance of its peoples in places where they arrived has fuelled a sympathetic consideration for others needing refuge from wars and other calamitous circumstances. This was put to an extreme test in the past few years where rescuing migrants, often from dangerous sea journeys, and providing hospitality was stretched to the limit.

Our borders are vulnerable to all kinds of exploitation as they include thousands of islands which can act as landing points and a land mass which acts as a connection point between Middle Eastern countries and Europe. Northern Africa countries are not exempt as they too border the Mediterranean and they in turn draw migrants who hope to flee to Europe often via her southern flank which includes Greece.

With this geo-social backdrop the recent influx of hundreds of thousands of migrants to Greece has been, and still remains, a huge challenge for local Health Care Professionals and others trying to deal with such unprecedented demands. Yet, this situation has created unprecedented controversies in a society with a predominant philoxenic attitude which has been suffering more than a decade of austerity. This letter provides a personal reflection of the challenges which confront local citizens and the migrants who land at Greek borders and the challenges involved in the pursuit for a better life.

After a treacherous trip via sea, most migrants land on a Greek island with an intense desire to quickly move on to the northern borders in order to reach more affluent, northern European countries. Yet, political and financial directives, dictate that in most cases they will stay in island camps for long periods of time. Their immediate needs include food, shelter, clothes and healthcare. Yet, there have been heavy criticisms on the part of the Greek state for limited interventions and offer of scarce resources been made available to mismatched needs. On the contrary, much international attention and appraisal has been drawn upon lay Greeks who have often taken individual initiatives to alleviate the suffering of these desperate people. Examples include the grandmothers who 'adopted' newborns, the baker who has been feeding large numbers and others who volunteered to help.

At one point, the United Nations refugee agency was concerned about the increasingly precarious situation at the border between Greece and Northern Macedonia, where force was often employed to prevent people from crossing. Many migrants failed to understand (or were intentionally misinformed) that they were legally obliged not to freely choose where to settle in Europe but rather to remain in the first country of entry, based on a European quota for migrant dispersion within the member states. In this context, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (1) were particularly worried about the thousands of vulnerable refugees and migrants, especially women and children massed on the Greek side of the border amid deteriorating conditions.

Although the Greek authorities were urged to enhance registration and reception arrangements for people in need of international protection and to provide urgent assistance to people stranded on their side of the

border and help them move towards reception facilities away from it, the great majority of lay Greeks continued to offer a positive and welcoming environment (2,3).

Therefore, nurses who are at the frontline of receiving and treating migrants need to be alert to the possibility that up to half of the people they are dealing with may have a mental disorder, often as the direct result of the three phases of migration (i.e. pre-migration trauma, migration per se and post-migration). Yet, nurses in Europe, and especially in Greece, are lacking the professional experience of dealing with people who have undergone systematic severely traumatic life events as caused by civil war or other similar conflict.

In this context, we need to prepare ourselves professionally to empathize yet, at the same time, take the necessary steps to avoid emotional burnout. The key word here is “resilience”, a quality that we should be able to help build in others and ourselves.

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