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HEALTH ASSESSEMENT OF BOSNIAN REFUGEES IN BLACK HAWK COUNTY, IOWA

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the public health status of the Bosnian refugees in Black Hawk County Health, Iowa. A random sample of 557 Bosnian medical records was selected from People's Community Health Clinic. Virtually all Bosnians seek health care at People's Community Health Clinic in Waterloo. High rates of smoking behaviors and dental health problems were the most common health concerns among this group. The Bosnians refugees had rather low hypertension rates, low use of alcohol, healthy weight and a health diet, and low history of cardiovascular diseases.

INTRODUCTION

The number of civilian victims in war and civil conflicts has dramatically increased during the 20th century (Médicins Sans Frontières [MSF]; 1997). Between 1980 and 1997, the worldwide refugee population increased from 8.9 million to an estimated 41 million refugees including internally displaced persons (The Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC]; 1999). In response to various needs of refugees, the United States' Refugee Resettlement Program offers many resettlement services for hundreds of thousands of refugees each year. The programs include health-related services that are designed to enable refugees to maintain and improve their physical and mental health (Bureau of Refugee Services, 1993). According to the Iowa Bureau of Refugee Services (1999), the State of Iowa has provided homes for up to 21,988 refugees. Among those refugees, more than 4,611 are from Bosnia. More than 3,500 of Bosnian refugees in the State of Iowa are in Black Hawk County

Besides resettlement issues, refugees encounter various other problems. Among those problems are health issues such as nutritional and communicable diseases, injuries, maternal health, and sexually transmitted diseases. These problems need attention from public health sectors (CDC, 1999). Some research has been done specifically on the health status of Bosnian refugees who have resettled in the United States. The health problems of this group included poor appetite, decreased memory, limited leisure time, mood swings, sleep problems, and decreased energy and patience (Baylor University, 1999). According to Ackerman (1997), Bosnian refugees who resettled in the United States typically were found to be suffering from malnutrition, tuberculosis, low immunization rates, depression, Hepatitis B, dental caries, and war-related injuries. Ackerman (1997) states that the greatest problems among the Bosnian refugees may stem from the psychiatric consequences of ethnic cleansing. He suggests that 65% of Bosnian refugees were found to have post-traumatic stress disorder, and 35% suffered from depression.

Due to the great variations in life experiences, physical and mental health status, and different cultural practices among refugees and immigrants, there is a need for ongo-

ing health assessments to explore more fully not only the medical and psychological problems of these individuals, but also their public health status.

The purpose of this study was to assess and describe the health status of Bosnian refugees in Black Hawk County, IA. The results showing their health status from the medical records analysis is presented.

METHODS

A descriptive study was conducted on the health status of Bosnian patients who have sought medical care at People's Community Health Clinic in Waterloo, IA. A random sample of 557 existing medical records of all Bosnian adult patients (18 years and older) who had been seen at the clinic was copied for purposes of the study. The names, social security numbers, and other identifying information on each individual patient were then blackened out by staff at the clinic for confidentiality reasons. Medical Records analysis was used as an instrument of data collection in this study. Demographic data such as sex, marital status, homelessness, family size, age, and insurance coverage information were collected and tallied from the patient information sheet while data on patients' health conditions were taken from medical record forms. These intake forms had information regarding cardiovascular risk factors, cancer, drug use, alcohol use, and dental health assessment. They also provided information on daily activities and gender-specific conditions. The data were entered and analyzed by using SPSS.

RESULTS

The results of this study showed that 49% of the Bosnians refugees in Black Hawk County used tobacco. The rate of smoking for general population in Black Hawk was 23.8% in 1999. Bosnians also had a very significant dental health challenge. 41 % reported having dental health problems, and the average time for visiting the dentist was 21 months. However, compared to the local population, Bosnians had low rates of obesity and alcohol consumption.

The rate of binge drinking in Black Hawk County in 1999 was 18.5%, and the rate of overweight population was 33.4. Their activity levels were also quite high. About 83% of the sample participated in a regular activity (Table 1).

DISCUSSION

Almost half of sample used tobacco. The high prevalence of tobacco use could result in future health problems that are associated with the various forms of tobacco use such as lung cancer, dental health problems, and others.

High Blood Pressure

In 1996, the percentage of Iowans who had high blood pressure was 22.5%). In Black Hawk County, 21.1% of the general population had high blood pressure (Iowa Department of Public Health, Center for Health Statistics, 1998). Among the Bosnian refugees in Black Hawk County, there were 17.2% subjects who reported high blood pressure. Although this is a lower rate compared to the U.S. as a whole, this rate could

Table 1. Results of Health Practices and Conditions of the Bosnian Refugees in Black Hawk County, 2000.

Variable		Number	%
Smokes cigarettes	Yes	273	49
	No	284	51
Drinks alcohol	Yes	111	20
	No	46	80
Is a binge drinker	No	557	100
Has high fat content in diet	Yes	217	39
	No	340	61
Participates in regular activity	Yes	462	83
	No	95	17
Patient is obese	No	557	100
Has family history of heart disease	Yes	134	24
	No	423	76
Has high blood pressure.....	Yes	95	17
	No	462	83
Can conduct all activities of daily living	Yes	557	100
Ever received pap smear (females only).....	Yes	266	90
	No	29	10
Results of pap smears taken (women only)	Positive	3	1
	Negative	263	99
Ever had breast examination (women only)	Yes	242	82
	No	53	18
Ever had mammogram (women only)	Yes	147	50
	No	147	50
Ever had breast cancer education (women only).....	Yes	294	100
	No	1	0
Ever had prostate cancer screening (men only).....	Yes	149	57
	No	113	43
Results of prostate screening (men only)	Negative	262	100
Has current dental problems	Yes	228	41
	No	329	59

go up in the future due to the other behavioral factors that increase the risk of hypertension such as smoking, alcohol consumption, fatty diet, and inactivity.

Obesity

Those refugees who reported being obese were less than 1%. This indicates that obesity was not a major health concern in this sample compared to the 28.6% in Black Hawk County who were reported obesity in 1994 (Yehieli, & Koch, 1996). However, 38.8% of the Bosnian refugees were reported to consume excess dietary fat. In 1999, the rate of overweight in Black Hawk County was 33.4% (Iowa Department of Public

Health, 2001). If this is not controlled, it could lead to a higher number of obese people among the Bosnians in the future due to a strong association between eating a high fat diet and obesity.

Family History of Cardiovascular Disease

The proportion of Bosnian refugees who reported a family history of cardiovascular disease was 23.7%. If preventive measures are taken, the risk of developing cardiovascular diseases will remain low.

Dental Health

The results of this study indicated that 40.8% of the Bosnians refugees were reported to have dental health problems. Although financial barriers might be a reason for this problem, behaviors such as smoking and poor dietary choices could have also contributed to their dental health problems. Dental health problems need a serious treatment response because they are important factors for overall health.

LIMITATIONS

This study was conducted by using secondary data. It is possible that errors could take place while filling the charts. Also, the lack of direct communication between the client and the provider could lead to a lack of important health information or misunderstanding of the questions asked. In addition, some information such as alcohol consumption could be underreported due the fear of being stigmatized.

CONCLUSIONS

Smoking behaviors and dental health problems were among the main concerns of Bosnians refugees in Black Hawk County. Although some other health concerns such as high fat diet consumption, and hypertension might become a future problem if preventive measures are not taken, they seemed not to be a concern at the moment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A comprehensive culturally appropriate disease prevention and health promotion program that focuses on cardiovascular health and cancer awareness should be developed and implemented by the Black Hawk Health Department.

Due to the high prevalence of tobacco use among the Bosnian refugees, the Black Hawk County Health Department should implement smoking cessation and tobacco use prevention programs among the Bosnian community.

Dental health seemed to be a health challenge among the Bosnian refugees. Preventive and curative measures should be taken.

Further research to find cultural beliefs and practices that could lead to poor health among the Bosnians communities should be done.

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