

Volunteering with Syrian American Medical Society:

in Lebanon's Bekaa valley

*'If you truly believe that all humans are created equal; you can't sit back and watch people live lives of utter desperation and suffering; for no reason but the circumstance of their birth.'*¹

Nervously, she lifted her scarf to reveal her nearly bald head. Only threads remained. Her husband had been shot by a sniper while on his way to buy bread for the family. Heartbroken, she brought her children to the clinic in search of cures for their enuresis, faltering growth, and night terrors. Stress had taken its toll; her body cried the tears she could not shed in front of her five fatherless children.

'THE UNDOCUMENTED'

With a pre-war population of 22 million, half of Syria's population are now refugees or IDPs (internally displaced people), and even more are in need of humanitarian aid. Almost a million dwell in neighbouring Lebanon, but there are many more who are unregistered and unaccounted for in this figure.² They are known as 'the undocumented.'

I volunteered in a series of refugee camps lining the Syrian border, in the Bekaa Valley, Lebanon. Our global team included doctors (GPs and specialists), nurses, occupational therapists, chiropractors and mental health professionals. We worked alongside the local MAPS (Multi-Aid-Programs) ground team who are themselves Syrian refugees.

NO CHILDHOOD

The stories of heartbreak don't stop. The 6-year-old boy who is mute after witnessing his father being killed. The cheeky 15-year-old boy, who fled Syria 4 years ago. He works for a local mechanic because he wants a career but he gets panic attacks. His recurring memory is running from house to house in search of help and finally finding two men sitting in their kitchens with their mouths wide open, staring. As

he draws closer, he stops, realising they are both dead. A childhood quickly turned into adulthood. Children have experienced terrors. They care for other children and are strapped with adult responsibilities.

There weren't buses of NGOs lined up to help — the Syrian American Medical Society Foundation (SAMS) was the only charity there. Families were shocked by our mere presence. They have queued for years and there seems to be some solace in being seen and heard, even momentarily, by a fellow human.

SMALL TRIUMPHS

There were times when I felt helpless. But there were also moments when I felt useful. Sometimes it was just reassurance, or realising that your child's illness is common and understandable. Other times it was simple medical care that made the difference: a 1-year old with congenital heart disease and diarrhoea who significantly improved with antipyretics and oral rehydration solution. Some needs were greater; I remember the 6-month-old baby with respiratory distress and bronchiolitis who needed oxygen therapy that had been rejected by the local hospital. But as a volunteer reiterated: *'We cannot let the vast desperation of a situation lead us to do nothing.'* And so it was the small triumphs that I had to constantly look for.

DREAMS

As time went by, I went from being incredulous at the trauma that humans had inflicted on one another, to feeling overwhelmed by the love, strength and resilience I saw in the refugees. They carry on. They talk about their dreams of returning to Syria. And they joke and laugh and dance, and say thank you more times than feels justified. In many ways they put me to shame.

I can still see the two best friends who joke they had killed off their husbands (they



Photo courtesy of Julie Lein, April 2018, 'The Widow's Camp' the Bekaa Valley, Lebanon.

hadn't survived a bombing), so that they could be together, and the 70-year old man who explained *'I don't want to be superman, I just want to be a great man,'* (he came requesting Viagra).

The facts are harrowing: half of a country's population are refugees or IDPs. It is hard to know that as we leave, they stay. 'Undocumented' but not unremembered. Now it is our role, not to be their voice, but their global loudspeakers.

We leave knowing that our work here has not even begun.

Rula Najim,

Imperial GP ST3, Department of Primary Care and Public Health, Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust, London.

Email: rula@doctors.org.uk

SAMS FOUNDATION

SAMS is a global medical relief organization that is working on the front lines of crisis relief in Syria and beyond to save lives and alleviate suffering. SAMS proudly provides dignified medical care to every patient in need.

<https://www.sams-usa.net>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp18X699233>

REFERENCES

1. Janah L. *Give Work: Reversing Poverty One Job at a Time*. London: Portfolio Penguin, 2017.
2. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Geneva, Switzerland: UNHCR, 2018. Total persons of concern. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/71> [accessed 7 Sep 2018].

"As time went by, I went from being incredulous at the trauma that humans had inflicted on one another to feeling overwhelmed by the love, strength and resilience I saw in the refugees."