Helping Refugee Doctors into Work in Wales: Displaced People in Action
By Caron Jennings

When a person becomes an asylum seeker, it's as though all their qualities, characteristics and achievements were stripped off. But the majority of asylum seekers are educated and have years of professional experience in their fields of expertise. They could work, build their skills and confidence, and positively bridge the waiting period. The reality, however, looks different: People are forced to spend their time waiting for their asylum claim to be decided, going to court, worrying about the future, pining for their family, friends and possessions, and the lives they had to leave behind.

In our work with Displaced People in Action (DPIA) we meet asylum-seekers wanting to work every day. Lawyers, accountants, teachers, lecturers, office workers and computer engineers are just some of the highly trained professionals we encounter. One of the professions that seemed to surface more and more frequently among our clients was that of medical doctor.

In general, doctors are very frequent among asylum seekers coming to Britain. With the Home Office dispersal scheme with Cardiff County Council coming up to its second year in April, there is now a constant number of about 1000 asylum seekers coming here on this scheme. There are also providers of accommodation who have private Home Office dispersal schemes, both here and in other Welsh counties. So the number of potentially highly qualified refugees looking for work increases.

Effectively this means that while Wales is suffering from a huge shortage of doctors, there is a pool of qualified asylum-seeking doctors in Wales who are unable to access employment. Our Project Worker Leona Evans, once an asylum-seeker herself, was fuelled by anger about this state of affairs. She initially met five doctors from different medical and geographical backgrounds who came to DPIA separately, all asking for support in finding ways out of enforced boredom and looming depression about their situation.

The group quickly expanded to 13 doctors seeking help in finding their way back into their professions. We soon found that there was absolutely no system in place in Wales to access this greatly needed pool of skilled medical professionals. In England there are organisations set up to provide financial assistance, but this does not extend to Wales. As a result four doctors moved to London in the past, and another doctor gave up his attempt to re-qualify and found a job as a factory worker because he had to provide for his family. He felt that on his salary as a factory worker it would take him so long to save up the money for the re-qualification courses and exams that it would simply be pointless.

The vice chair of DPIA, Aled Edwards, brought the matter to the attention of the National Assembly for Wales and of Dr. B K Bhowmick, Associate Dean for Overseas Doctors in Wales. Dr. Bhowmick, himself a refugee, empathised with the group and soon doors were beginning to open. The group expanded through word of mouth resulting in 22 refugee doctors registering with us. We set up several meetings, aiming to assess the individual needs of our clients, and started researching the resources available.

In September 2002 the project received £73,600 from the National Assembly for Wales for the refugee doctors' re-qualification programme. The work then started immediately. We set up a medical library at the DPIA Drop in Centre, which includes English language textbooks and examples of past exams for doctors. We also started running a study group. The ESOL department at Bridgend College was already offering ILETS preparation courses and were keen to support the doctors. We are now able to provide refugee doctors who are preparing for the ILETS exam with travel cards so they can attend the classes. Meanwhile we have also made connections with the PLAB 1 and 2 course centres, making administrative arrangements for payments so that the doctors can now register for the exams and have their fees reimbursed.
To date the project resulted in 33 doctors registering on our database. Of those, 3 have successfully found employment in the NHS in Wales, and 3 currently have clinical attachments. Seven doctors have taken the IELTS exam in the last 3 months, of whom 5 have passed. Two doctors have also passed PLAB 1 recently, and 2 have passed PLAB 2.

To date, in Cardiff alone, about 30 of the asylum seekers' population have been identified as doctors. We anticipate that over the next year our Refugee Doctors Group will at least triple in membership and that we will need to cater to refugee doctors all over Wales. We also hope that in the future this service will be extended to other occupations.

Refugee doctors are an untapped source of employees for the NHS, and they are hungry for work. Most, being single, are willing to relocate even to rural areas. To educate a High School Graduate to become a medical doctor costs thousands and thousands of pounds, and the 'drop out' rate is high. To re-educate a refugee doctor costs approximately £3,600. The 'drop out' rate is zero.

Caron Jennings is Volunteer Co-ordinator at DPIA and arranges work placements for refugees and asylum-seekers in Wales. She can be contacted by email on carondpia_uk@yahoo.co.uk.