Refugee Health Professionals
Impact Report—Sept 2011 to Aug 2013

Building Bridges Partnership:
Refugee Council
Refugee Assessment and Guidance Unit—London Met University
Glowing Results
Foreword

Dr. Sandy Gupta—

“It has been a real pleasure to have been involved in the Refugee Health Professionals Programme. Since my role began in 2009 as Chair of the Clinical Steering Group, I have worked alongside caring colleagues at Whipps Cross University Hospital, Newham General Hospital and West Middlesex Hospital. To everyone’s credit we have now seen some 50 refugee doctors coming through the programme over a 4 year period who are now practising and working in the UK health system.

The integration of refugee doctors follows a rigorous period of assessment, structural teaching and education with a strong focus on communication. It has been a rewarding experience for all.

Special acknowledgements deservedly go to the Refugee Council, RAGU, Glowing Results and of course NHS London. We are also indebted to our hospitals, colleagues and all the administration staff.

The refugee doctors and health professionals should be commended. Their enthusiasm, professionalism and resilience have been noted throughout their ‘journey’ so many are now integrated in UK society and helping to contribute to the welfare of patients.

We celebrated in 2011 after 2 years of the Programme and now are delighted to be celebrating again in 2013 following even more success!”

Dr Sandy Gupta, MD FRCP
Consultant Cardiologist
Whipps Cross/Barts Health NHS Trusts, London
Chair, Clinical Steering Group, Refugee Doctors Programme, London
Introduction

London is one of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse cities in the world and one where the NHS serves patients with 270 different nationalities, speaking 300 different languages. In order to best serve patients, doctors and other health professionals need to reflect the people they care for, something the NHS has embraced.

One third of NHS employees are from a black, minority or ethnic background, mirroring those who visit hospitals, GP surgeries, dentists and other health services in the capital. Within this group of employees, a small percentage, too small in relation to the number who are qualified, come from a refugee background.

To date, there have been over 1200 doctors from a refugee background identified by the British Medical Association (BMA), with over half thought to be residing in London. In 2001, the BMA set up a database in partnership with the Refugee Council to gauge the number of refugee doctors and their specialisations. Less than 15% of all registered doctors are currently practising medicine.

Refugees are people who are legally allowed to work in the UK. Many wish to rebuild the career they had before they were forced to leave their home country as a result of oppression, persecution, civil unrest and war. Refugee health professionals come with skills, experience and specialisations that could really benefit the NHS workforce, but to date only a small percentage have been able to return to clinical practice.

Despite all the qualifications, experience and skills, the routes back into practising medicine, dentistry, nursing, among other health professions, can be long and difficult even for someone who was a practising health professional in their home country.

The asylum system itself can impose enforced unemployment, sometimes for significant periods of time. Long term unemployment can lead to a lack of confidence and deskillling, particularly in clinical professions such as medicine and dentistry. Combined with a lack of work experience and professional references from UK employers, refugee health professionals (RHPs) are at a distinct disadvantage when they try to resume their career in the UK.
“It is partly due to the lack of clinical skills, which is difficult when you’ve been here for a while without any contact with patients and you haven’t been practising as a doctor”.

Understanding the Barriers to Employment

The return to practising as a health professional can be a long and complicated process for a number of reasons:

- The asylum system means that people do not have permission to work until they get a decision from the Home Office. Long term unemployment often results in losing personal and professional skills.

- The health system and recruitment methods here may be very different from a home country, so familiarisation with the NHS system is needed.

- The routes into practising are varied and finding the right information and advice can be challenging, particularly when people are not aware of refugee entitlements.

- Healthcare professionals must register with the relevant regulating body before they can work and to do so they must meet specific requirements including passing prescribed exams testing their language, communication and clinical skills. Specialist advice and support is important.
How the Building Bridges Programme Helps

The Building Bridges Programme was originally set up by NHS Employers to support Refugee Healthcare Professionals (RHPs) re-qualify to UK standards, gain a good understanding of safety and working practices in the NHS and to support them into suitable employment.

It started in January 2009 and the programme was taken over by the NHS London in April 2010. The current contract expires in August 2014.

Building Bridges is now a partnership of 3 delivery organisations: Glowing Results, RAGU (Refugee Assessment & Guidance Unit) and Refugee Council who work together to deliver a range of specialist services. Building Bridges is supported by 3 NHS Hospital trusts as well as over 20 GP Health Practices and other secondary and primary health care centres across London.

The partnership provides a package of core services relevant to all RHPs attempting to overcome the barriers to employment. These barriers include:

- English language and communication skills required to compete in the labour market
- Conversion of professional qualifications to meet requirements laid down by the bodies regulating healthcare profession including General Medical Council, General Dental Council, and Nursing and Midwifery Council.
- Access to relevant UK work experience and references
- Familiarisation with the health care sector in the UK
- Knowledge about the labour market, recruitment process and employability skills to apply effectively for vacancies in a highly competitive job market

“I spent more than two months calling all the hospitals I found on the internet (Wikipedia) but none of them could give me the opportunity to do my clinical attachment. Luckily, a friend informed me that [Building Bridges] helps refugee doctors. After being in touch with them they managed to secure a place at hospital where I will do an attachment and the same time this opens up again all kind of opportunities for my future career.”

(Doctor from Burundi)
Partnership Organisations

Voluntary sector organisations and the NHS working together to ensure the best doctors and health professionals are supported back into employment

Building Bridges Partners’ Provision

1) **Refugee Council**: Preparation courses for Professional Linguistic Assessment Board (PLAB) exams, Part 1 and Part 2. Also arranges clinical attachments and provides language and communication skills support and pre-job interview preparation.

In addition to the provision of these core services, RAGU and Refugee Council jointly administer a Beneficiary Fund to provide financial support to cover tuition/exam fees and other expenses. Refugee Council is also the lead partner of the Building Bridge programme.

2) **Glowing Results**: Tailored English courses to help RHPs achieve the International English Language Test (IELTS) scores as prescribed by the regulating bodies.

2) **RAGU** (Refugee Assessment and Guidance Unit), London Metropolitan University: Specialist careers guidance for health professionals. RAGU also provides NHS employability training, structured work placements, relevant volunteering opportunities and support to enter paid work in healthcare.

Partner hospitals

The Building Bridges programme achievements would not be possible without unwavering support of the 3 NHS hospitals:

- **Whipps Cross University Hospital**
- **Newham University Hospital**
- **West Middlesex Hospital (Isleworth)**

The clinical attachment leads from these hospitals have dedicated their time to arrange clinical attachments for refugee doctors. Clinical attachments provide doctors with invaluable UK experience and the opportunity to gain a UK reference, both of which are critical when applying for jobs. A clinical attachment is a period of time (1-3 months) when a doctor is attached to a clinical unit, with a named supervisor, learning about the legal, ethical and cultural context of medical practice through observing hospital teams in their day-to day activities.
Refugee Council

Refugee Council is the leading charity supporting refugees in the UK, helping them rebuild their lives. 2012 marked the organisation’s 60th anniversary of working with refugees. We exist to ensure that refugees receive the protection they need, the dignity and respect they deserve, and the same opportunities as others.

Refugee Council—Partner delivery details

The Refugee Council has been supporting refugee health professionals for over 13 years. In 2001, the Refugee Council and the BMA jointly setup a refugee doctors database to capture the number of doctors in need of support. This database continues to be an important source of data. Since then we have been providing careers advice and guidance and have developed into a specialised programme supporting the conversion of professional overseas qualifications to meet UK standards. To enhance our activities we work closely with a number of NHS trusts, the London Deanery, various training providers and professional registration bodies.

Through the Building Bridges Programme we focus on helping refugee doctors to:

- **Refresh** medical knowledge and skills before taking Professional Linguistic Assessment Board (PLAB) Part 1 and Part 2 tests where refugee doctors need to demonstrate proficiency in English, professional skills and knowledge. We provide a series of preparation courses following the PLAB syllabus and are delivered by experienced NHS clinicians. Doctors also have access to our Skills Lab where they can receive supervised practice sessions with medical equipment and manikins.

- **Improve** language and communication skills to effectively support the needs of patients. Our work supports doctors to enhance their active listening, questioning, explaining and advising skills. They also learn how to ensure patients are involved in decisions about their own care. Our Language and Communication Skills tutor provides support through a series of workshops carefully designed to address the needs of refugee doctors from diverse linguistic backgrounds.

- **Access** to clinical attachments to gain an overview of UK medical procedures and systems within NHS hospitals and to observe medical teams at work before assuming professional duties themselves. Access to clinical attachments represents a significant barrier for refugee doctors as opportunities are scarce, difficult to access and often costly.
Refugee Council — Partner delivery details

Working with partner hospitals we place doctors within different clinical units for 8-12 weeks. Each doctor is given a named supervisor where they learn about the legal, ethical and cultural contexts of medical practice by observing hospital teams throughout their day-to-day activities. The attachment provides refugee doctors with invaluable UK experience and the opportunity to gain a UK reference, both of which are critical when applying for jobs.

- **Develop** job search skills. Recruitment processes in the UK differ significantly from those many refugee doctors are used to; they may need considerable support to develop the necessary skills and confidence to compete effectively on equal terms with UK trained medical graduates.

- **Employ.** Our services are directly linked to the Clinical Apprenticeship Scheme (CAPS) run by the London Deanery. These are specifically designed for refugee doctors applying for their first UK job. The scheme, endorsed by the UK Foundation Programme Office, offers paid medical work placements for 6 months in the NHS and provides intensive skills training. In addition, refugee doctors are also helped to access other work opportunities including trust grade jobs, foundation training jobs, locum jobs, and so on.
Esma came to Refugee Council through a referral, in January 2012, after she passed the IELTS exam. She enrolled on to the next available PLAB course and made her way through the whole curriculum in a record time. By the end of May 2012 she gained both qualifications, PLAB Part 1 and Part 2.

Her enthusiasm and quiet determination motivated the whole group. The level of peer-to-peer support surpassed all the similar activities carried out by the doctors enrolled on to the project.

Esma was accepted on to a clinical attachment within a couple of weeks of passing PLAB 2. In her second week she wrote: "Not confident (English language skills) but hope it will improve with time. Exhausted from running to observe as much as possible but enjoying every moment. It feels like coming home".

After completing her attachment, Esma attended our Language, Communication and Job Search Skills workshops in preparation for an upcoming job interview.

In August 2012 Esma started her first paid UK job as a Medical Doctor.
**Malik and Asya** are medical doctors and a married couple. Malik has 19 years surgery experience and Asya has 14 years of specialist experience in Obstetrics and Gynaecology.

After passing the IELTS examinations we enrolled them on to our PLAB preparation course in April 2010. By March 2011 they had both passed PLAB Part 1 and Part 2 tests on their first attempts.

The Refugee Council then arranged a clinical attachment for each. Anxious in the beginning, they immersed themselves fully in the attachments and made sure that no opportunity to learn was missed. Their eagerness to understand and improve was noticed by the staff and they were well supported to successfully navigate the NHS system.

Following the attachments, they came back for our Language, Communication and Job Search Skills workshops before applying for employment opportunities. By now both had secured GMC registration and were eligible for work as qualified doctors. They successfully secured employment as Foundation Year 2 doctors through the CAPS in July 2011.

In March 2012 they moved on to their next job; Asya as a Senior House Officer in Obstetrics & Gynaecology, and Malik as a Senior House Officer in Surgery. Their wish is to become General Practitioners.

Asya: “It helps to know that you are on the right track, that there is a place where you get advice and encouragement, especially when your confidence slips away and you’re left with your anxieties.”

Malik: “This organisation can guide them (refugee doctors), support them financially and provide them with practical support like attending preparation courses and many other facilities. Therefore, I strongly advise all refugee doctors to register themselves with this organisation and gain beneficial help and support.”
Glowing Results—Partner delivery details

Glowing Results offers small group language tuition at a high level for RHPs who are preparing for the IELTS* exam or need to improve their academic English. This is run by a published author of IELTS materials, who has more than 10 years’ experience of working with refugee doctors.

As a partner in the Building Bridges project, Glowing Results delivers:

- A free weekly tutorial to RHPs aiming to achieve the required IELTS score. The tutorial consists of 4 hours of group input and one hour which is set aside for one-to-one support for individual clients.
- Additional online input via a blog which is offered free to clients
- Advice and guidance, including additional materials, for self study
- Language testing and assessment of new RHPs

*IELTS (International English Language Testing System) Test measures the ability to communicate in English across all four language skills; reading, writing, listening and speaking. The GMC requires a minimum score of 7.0 in each module as evidence of proficiency for the purpose of registration.
RAGU, (Refugee Assessment and Guidance Unit)

Since 1995 RAGU has provided services for refugee professionals, to support their re-qualification, professional registration and return to employment. RAGU also contributed to research at national and pan-European level. Specialist careers advice and guidance, targeted employability training, work placements and management of a beneficiary fund are all delivered by qualified and experienced careers advisers in this higher education institute.

RAGU, London Metropolitan University — Partner details

RAGU has worked for 18 years to enable refugee health professionals (RHPs) to contribute their skills to UK health services in NHS roles from Band 2 to Band 7. These posts include registered doctors, dentists, pharmacists, physiotherapists and occupational therapists. Additionally, RAGU has supported many RHPs into ‘transition’ employment such as health care assistants, phlebotomists, physiotherapy and medical laboratory assistants and pharmacy technicians and into volunteering roles. Transition roles have proved to be a crucial stepping stone for RHPs progress towards re-qualification, providing NHS work experience, opportunities to develop skills and understanding of the work environment, employers’ references and re-build self-confidence. RAGU has also successfully advocated with professional bodies and employers on behalf of RHPs for professional registration purposes and employment rights and supported clients into further and post-graduate training.

Sixty five per cent of RAGU clients are doctors and the remaining 35% include pharmacists, dentists, nurses, midwives, biomedical scientists and allied health professionals such as physiotherapists.

RAGU’s team of experienced careers guidance professionals provides careers guidance, professional re-orientation and motivational support for RHP clients to rebuild health careers in the UK. RAGU’s specialist careers guidance and employability programme includes:

Careers guidance – advisers work one-to-one to help refugee health professionals decide career goals, develop realistic and achievable plans of action and take positive steps towards professional registration and alternative health careers

Up-to-date information and NHS familiarisation training – on career pathways, registration processes, the health job market and how UK recruitment and selection processes operate

Access to professional networks – through an innovative programme of four linked workshops that enable refugee health professionals to develop their own networks and discover new opportunities through collaborative enquiry

‘Employability’ training and skills development – through the delivery of training and support - informed by current recruitment practice - prepare CVs, application forms and personal statements targeted for health roles and preparation for competency based interviews

Structured work placement opportunities – with a wide variety of primary health and hospital teams giving the NHS experience and reference needed to find paid employment in ‘transition’ roles

E-guidance and support - through regular email guidance and bulletins with information about training, job and voluntary opportunities
Maryam, a pharmacist with five years experience, came to RAGU in 2010. Unclear how to resume her career, her RAGU Adviser explained the career route for refugee pharmacists, explored Maryam’s experience, skills and knowledge she had and those she needed to develop. From this Maryam prepared a personal development plan, with clear goals for the short and long term, which included looking for relevant voluntary work.

Maryam attended RAGU Employability workshops on the NHS, preparing CVs and interviews, completed a skills audit to identify her skills and used this to prepare a strong CV. After coaching on how to approach employers she took courage and asked over 25 Pharmacy retail managers for voluntary work, presenting her CV, before being accepted by a reputable retail Pharmacy for 4 hours a week. Within 3 months this transformed into paid work in Medicine Dispensing 4 days a week.

Maryam: “I had to start somewhere, I came off JSA and it was a great feeling. At first I was scared of talking with customers – I didn’t understand them! But working helped so much to improve my listening. After 10 months I took the IELTS exam, did not pass first time, but continued to work and study hard. ….. and passed in early 2012 which was such a relief! The work really helped this. I also understood the difference of working here and Iran: computerised systems, three times as many prescriptions, knowing contra-indications, working in a team. It was so important to do this job.”

With her IELTS pass, relevant UK work experience and excellent references, Maryam’s application to the General Pharmaceutical Council was successful. With RAGU support she applied to universities for the Overseas Pharmacy (OSPAP) course and in September 2012 started the 1 year training at University. She successfully passed this in August 2013. She has now secured a year’s pre-registration post after OSPAP from the retail Pharmacist who gave Maryam her first volunteering opportunity and she will starts in September 2013. Her journey and success has taken 3.5 years. Maryam says: ‘I could not have achieved all this without RAGU’s continued support’.
RAGU, London Metropolitan University—Partner details

Work Placement Programme

“I feel like a (health) professional again” (midwife now working as a health care assistant/ phlebotomist in an Islington GP Surgery following her Primary Health placement in Camden).

Since 2011 RAGU has set up and managed work placement for 30 refugee health professionals in different London health settings. These range from GP Practices and Health Centres across London to NHS Community Services, Mental Health Trusts, Hospitals and Public Health Agencies.

Placements are aimed at health professionals who have good English language and communication skills but are not yet quite at the level required by the regulatory bodies to pursue registration. They often have some relevant UK volunteer experience but have tried without success to find employment in support roles such as health care assistant, maternity support worker or physiotherapy assistant.

More than 50% of the clients who completed placements found related paid employment within a short period taking up health roles from Band 2 up to Band 5 posts in the NHS and other organisations.

The Work Placement Programme

Has developed a core competences template that can be adjusted to meet the needs of individual placement host organisations

- Selects applicants carefully on the basis of work readiness, motivation, relevance to their short and long term career plan, their existing career plans and good communication skills
- Provides one-to-one support and comprehensive pre-placement training to help trainees decide personal goals, handle cross-cultural challenges and interviews and complete a reflective learning log
- Offers structured experience working 3 days a week for 3 months and regular review meetings with host organisation, trainee and RAGU co-ordinator
- Provides extensive post-placement support to find paid employment quickly

Work placements give refugee health professionals the NHS experience and reference they need to compete on more equal terms in the competitive NHS job market. Trainees have opportunities to learn about NHS systems, protocols and governance as well as refresh their clinical skills and knowledge and build up confidence. Communication skills with patients and colleagues improve - often dramatically - enabling clients to achieve the English IELTS test scores needed for registration more quickly.
Case Study

Samia

Samia, a qualified Occupational Therapist (OT), came to RAGU in 2011. She had already applied for numerous OT jobs without success and was volunteering in her children’s school as a teaching assistant. With RAGU’s support she applied and was awarded Health Professions Council registration. Though exempted from taking the IELTS exam, Samia needed to develop her communication skills, re-build her confidence and gain UK work experience before realistically becoming employed in registered OT work.

A work placement was set up with Camden and Islington Foundation Trust in a Day centre for elderly patients with mental health issues. Samia was involved in case working with clients, assessments, home visits, co-facilitating OT groups, writing reports and participating in multi-disciplinary team meetings. Her key challenge was grappling with specialist OT terminology and the everyday language of service users to be able to work effectively with patients. Each week she wrote a weekly reflective log to document her progress.

Her supervisor wrote: ‘The team benefitted hugely from Samia’s contribution to our work. She was diligent in carrying out duties assigned to her, thought creatively about issues being faced by the service and contributed her ideas to the process of running group sessions on a day to day basis.

After 3 months in placement Samia made substantial progress, had an excellent reference and gained considerable work experience and skills. Above all her confidence had rocketed. A few weeks after her placement she started working voluntarily, in an organisation providing paediatric OT services as an OT Assistant. In 2012 she started paid work as a Band 5 Occupational Therapist.
Building Bridges—Outcomes and achievements

In the 2 year period between September 2011 and August 2013 the Building Bridges partnership has supported:

- **81 refugee health professionals into paid employment within the NHS**

  ◊ **36 refugee doctors were supported to obtain GMC licence to practice and get into employment**
  
  17 of these were employed through Clinical Apprenticeship Placement Scheme (CAPS) run by London Deanery
  
  19 accessed a variety of posts such as Senior House Officer, Foundation FY1 and FY2 jobs, specialist, etc.)

  ◊ **45 were supported to secure employment within associated health profession positions** (e.g. Health Care Assistants, Phlebotomists, Physiotherapists, Pharmacy Assistants)

- **49 refugee health professionals have been supported into further training as part of their requalification process**

- **25 refugee doctors completed clinical attachments as a part of familiarisation with the NHS**

- **64 employers from across the NHS have been engaged to provide work placement and possible employment opportunities**

As a direct result of the Building Bridges refugee health professional programme, the NHS and wider communities are now benefiting from the employment of 81 skilled and experienced health professionals.
132 new refugee health professionals supported in this period.

In addition, we offer continued support to a far larger number who registered with us in previous years but require on-going support.

Building Bridges Partnership delivery—Summary

In the 2 years between September 2011 and August 2013:

- **132** newly registered refugee health professionals provided with **information, advice and guidance (IAG) sessions**
- **45** attended **International English Language Testing System (IELTS) preparation tutorials**
- To date, **14** of these 45 have gone on to **pass IELTS test** and achieve the GMC’s language requirements
- **30** supported to complete **work placements** in a range of health settings including GP surgeries, pharmacies and community services
- There have been **600 attendances at job search workshops**
- **14** refugee doctors supported to **pass the Professional Linguist Assessment Board Level 1 (PLAB1) examinations**
- A further **15** doctors supported to **pass the PLAB2 examinations** and become a qualified doctors available to practice within the NHS
- **25 Clinical attachments** arranged and supported within NHS partner hospitals
Outcomes and achievements

36 refugee doctors now registered with GMC and practising within the NHS

45 associated health professionals now employed within a wide range of professional positions

25 clinical attachments arranged within NHS partner hospitals

Building Bridges—Outcomes and achievements

- Clinical Attachments by partner hospital
  - Basildon: 2
  - Ealing: 1
  - King’s College Hospital: 1
  - Newham: 8
  - West Middlesex: 2
  - Whipps Cross: 4

- Job outcomes by role
  - Clinical Apprenticeship Scheme Doctors: 21%
  - Foundation Training Posts: 11%
  - Trust Doctor / Senior House Officer roles: 10%
  - Locum / Speciality doctors: 2%
  - Associated Health Professions: 56%

- Job outcomes by borough / region - Total 81
Beneficiary Profile

132 refugee health professionals supported between Sept 2011 and August 2013 (2 years)

Our clients come from all 33 London Boroughs

Building Bridges delivery takes place from within our partners centres in Newham, Islington and Tower Hamlets
Beneficiary Profile

Top 3 countries of origin are Afghanistan, Sudan and Iran mirroring international humanitarian crisis.

The majority of refugee health professionals are aged between 31 and 40.
Conclusion

The inclusion of refugee health professionals in the NHS workforce strengthens the ability of NHS organisations to meet their equality and diversity goals and deliver high quality services to their patients and the wider community.

There is a strong business case to support RHPs:

- RHPs provide a wide pool of significant experience, talents and skills
- Employing RHPs helps to fill the gaps in the NHS workforce
- Re-training a refugee doctor is a fraction of the cost required for training a UK doctor - and this also applies to other Refugee health professionals
- The retention rate amongst RHPs is high as most remain in the UK for the rest of their working lives
- Supporting skilled and experienced people off welfare support and into work is a key government agenda

As a public body and the largest employer in Europe, it is important for the NHS to be a leading example of good practice.

Employing RHPs contributes to:

- Excellent patient care as a result of a representative workforce reflecting the communities it serves
- Widening participation
- Providing excellent value for money
- Supporting diversity and equal access to services, training and development opportunities
- Reducing unemployment in disadvantaged refugee communities and providing role models for the refugee community
Conclusion

Despite some real achievements there is still much to do. The Building Bridges partnership has registered over three hundred refugee health professionals to date, 120 of whom are doctors. Without the support of the Building Bridges Programme their opportunities for continuing their careers are greatly diminished. We encourage everybody involved in health services to see refugee health professionals as potential source of skilled professionals and people worth investing in.