



For Immediate Release

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PCCC physician visits Africa to help refugees with disabilities

(Kingston, Ont.) A rehabilitation physician at Providence Continuing Care Centre's St. Mary's of the Lake Hospital in Kingston has made recommendations to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to improve conditions for the disabled in an African Refugee Camp. Dr. Joy Wee visited the Dadaab Refugee Camp in Kenya in July to determine the feasibility of Community Based Rehabilitation (CBR) at the camp.

The camp near the Somali border has drawn refugees fleeing violence and conflict in Somalia and neighbouring countries since 1991. Dr. Wee says the level of disability is high because of violence, poor nutrition and inadequate medical care. "There is only one trained occupational therapist for a population of about 140,000 refugees," she explains. Modern medical equipment is almost non-existent. "At one site, the terrain is sandy, making independent manual wheelchair access virtually impossible."

In addition the level of discrimination experienced by disabled refugees is high. "Virtually everyone with a visible disability undergoes regular taunting and harassment, and many are physically harmed. A disabled teacher from a minority group reported being stoned daily on the way to school," Dr. Wee recounts.

CBR is a strategy that aims to empower persons with disabilities. In the camp, it has involved training incentive workers to provide therapy to fellow refugees with disabilities. It has been recognized by the World Health Organization as an effective way of raising awareness of disability issues and improving participation of people with disabilities. Dr. Wee spent three weeks in Dadaab Refugee Camp interviewing people with disabilities, their caregivers, family members and community leaders. She also provided hands on training of camp workers in CBR.

She concludes that CBR should and could be introduced in the refugee camp, which has become a semi-permanent home for many. "The camp is likely to continue for at least 15 years," she says. "The skills and attitudes that we teach refugees would follow them, and would help improve discrimination and lack of awareness if they return to their country, or go elsewhere."

Dr. Wee's findings from her work in Kenya were reported to the United Nation's High Commissioner for Refugees and affiliated organizations. She will publish reports on her experiences in medical journals. Her work was done in conjunction with a Kenyan-based physician interested in CBR in the refugee camp. Dr. Wee received partial funding for her trip to the Dadaab Refugee Camp from an international non-governmental organization; the majority was self-funded. Dr. Wee has previously traveled to China and Nepal to take part in research and teaching projects in CBR. She is also working on a Master's in CBR at Queen's University.

Providence Continuing Care Centre (PCCC) is the leading regional provider of non-acute health care in Southeastern Ontario and a major centre for teaching and research, through our affiliation with Queen's University. PCCC has three main sites: St. Mary's of the Lake Hospital, Mental Health Services and Providence Manor in Kingston.

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