Hansen’s Disease in Georgia: A Modern Reassessment of an Ancient Disease

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Project Partners: Emory Midtown Travel Clinic
Populations Served: Immigrants and refugees in the state of Georgia with Hansen’s Disease
Project Timeframe: 4 months

Medical Assessment Arm

Project Goals:
Define the epidemiology and treatment outcomes of Hansen’s Disease (leprosy) in the immigrant and refugee communities living in the state of Georgia.

Expected Outcomes:
Complementary projects by Emory students of different disciplines to address varied aspects of leprosy in Georgia

Progress to Date:
Article on Leprosy Reactions in final editing stages, to be published in Clinical Infectious Diseases

Next Steps:
Follow through with publication process

Type 1 leprosy reaction
Type 2 leprosy reaction

Social Assessment Arm

Project Goals:
(1) To explore and document the lived experience of Hansen’s Disease among migrants living in Atlanta, Georgia.
(2) To link individual case histories of immigrants living in Atlanta to a broader analysis of health, stigma, and human rights issues.

Methods:
Collected “Illness narratives” from migrants currently receiving treatment at the Emory Healthcare TravelWell Clinic via focus group interviews. To date, have completed interviews with four individuals.

Lived Experiences:

"I looked for a dermatologist at Northside, and because of her own misunderstanding/delusion, she terrified me and said that there was no treatment and that I needed to be in the ICU, in observation, with no contact with other people."

"... the stigma is very big... people are very afraid... you can’t be talking about it because people—friends will be afraid... even people with whom you have close friendships, say, ‘Wow, this is contagious? Wow, you can’t work in Americans’ homes.’"

"I have some nieces who... participated in Hansen’s disease groups and gave me a lot of information... I started to eat even better... and thank God, I’m here (in America)."

"My daughter got married here. I already have my second grandchild here. I’m not going back... Yes, it’s my country, I was born there, I love my country, but I don’t feel myself of Brazil anymore. I don’t see myself there."

"Oh! And about work. We have very little contact with the clients... still, one person acted strangely... She found out in our circle of friends. She came up to me, was looking at my body, you know? Acting afraid... wanting to see if I had become deformed."

"With Americans, I prefer not even to contact because I’d be deported."

Directions for Future Research:
(1) Continue to explore the role of community in the treatment of infectious disease in a migratory context.
(2) Further our understanding of stigma and human rights violations experienced by migrants with Hansen’s Disease within their country of origin as well as in the US context.
(3) Better address the unique medical, legal, and cultural challenges facing migrants in the United States.