

Alpert students seek volunteers for newly-formed human rights asylum clinic

Physicians, healthcare professionals invited to forensic training conference to be held Saturday, February 8

BY MARY KORR
RIMJ MANAGING EDITOR

PROVIDENCE – A group of Alpert medical students have formed a student-run clinic to provide forensic psychological and medical evaluations to survivors of persecution seeking asylum in this country. A training session will be held this Saturday and space remains available. (See details, link to program on next page.)

Called the Brown Human Rights Asylum Clinic (BHRAC), it is one of a handful nationwide, modeled on the Weill Cornell Center for Human Rights in New York City, the first student-run asylum clinic, which was formed several years ago. Its medical director, 1977 Brown graduate Joanne Ahola, MD, a psychiatrist, will serve on the expert panel at the Saturday conference. She has trained health professionals nationwide in evaluating and documenting the psychological effects of torture and other forms of persecution.

The Brown clinic partners with Physicians for Human Rights (PHR), which acts as the referral organization for asylum seekers, via immigration attorneys. Brown Professor Eli Y. Adashi, MD, PHR board member and former dean of the medical school, serves as faculty advisor.

REBECCA SLOTKIN MD'16, one of the founders of the Brown clinic, an outgrowth of her interest in global health issues, said volunteers are needed to perform physical, psychological and gynecological evaluations to those seeking asylum. "We need physicians who are interested in doing these kinds of evaluations and who are passionate about this kind of work," she said.

Her words aptly describe the motivations of two of her peers who helped found the group. **WILLIAM BERK, MD'16**, said his experience as

a 17-year-old working on an Indian reservation for five months sparked his interest in domestic refugee populations. And a summer stint last year brought him face-to-face with the plight of migrants. Last summer he volunteered with an organization called No More Deaths on the Mexican-Arizona border in the Sonoran Desert, "shuttling food, water and medical supplies to areas where migrants come across the border," he said. The *New York Times* featured this humanitarian effort in an August article. Berk's boots-on-the-ground approach is, he said, "apolitical." He describes asylum

seekers as encompassing a wide range of individuals – from artists, to political dissidents, to victims of state-sponsored violence.

Co-founder **ANDY A. HOANG's** passion for this work is deeply rooted. At age 7, he arrived here from Vietnam with his family. "My grandfather, my



MARY KORR

From left, William Berk (MD'16), Rebecca Slotkin (MD'16) and Andy A. Hoang (MPH, MD'17) view the website of the Brown Human Rights Asylum Clinic.



COURTESY OF WILLIAM BERK

Alpert student William Berk, at left, volunteered last summer with a group called No More Deaths. He and other volunteers deposited food, water, and first-aid supplies to areas in the Sonoran Desert, Arizona, where migrants traverse and where many have perished.



Alpert medical students instrumental in the formation of the asylum clinic are, from left, Sean Love (MD'17), Andy Hoang (MD'17), David Corner (MD'17), Nat Nelson (MD'17), Peter Kaminski (MD'15), Liam Sullivan (MD'17), Michelle Chiu (MD'17), Caitlin Ryus (MD'17), Josh Rodriguez-Sdrenicki (MD'16), Rebecca Slotkin (MD'16), William Berk (MD'16), and Linnea Sanderson (MD'17). The Yellow Lab is Penny, the therapy dog.

father, and my uncle were political prisoners. My dad spent half a decade in a re-education camp, and my uncle and grandfather spent a decade. Our entire family was considered traitors to the state; they were blackballed from all forms of formal employment, and we lived in abject poverty up until we came to the United States.

"My memories of Vietnam are just images of poverty and hopelessness," he

continues. "My childhood, like that of many asylum seekers, was colored by many social and economic difficulties even after coming to the United States. But we were given asylum and a right to resettle in the United States. Not everyone is as fortunate as we were. The clinic will serve to help other victims of torture and abuse receive the same opportunity."

Before attending medical school, Hoang, MD'17, who also has a master's degree in public health, worked with children with disabilities and as a consultant for PHR.

Slotkin describes the clinic concept as a medico-legal arrangement, rather than the traditional doctor/patient relationship. According to these students, the affidavits the medical students draft under the physicians is crucial information judges use to determine whether or not to grant asylum.

The trio was trained as medical student

evaluators at a conference in Chicago last year. They said the clinical examinations help determine if the injuries or trauma sustained, the "sequelae of the events," are consistent with the accounts of those seeking asylum. Hoang said the trauma may have happened decades before applying for asylum and the effects are not readily apparent.

Currently, those seeking asylum must travel to New York or Boston to undergo evaluation. The Brown clinic will fill a much-needed gap in services, these students believe.

Hoang concludes from the heart. "Doctors occupy unique positions – not leveraging that power to push for the protection of human rights is a missed opportunity," he said.

The eventual commitment on the part of medical volunteers who join them in this effort would be two hours a month at a local clinic location. The students will coordinate the schedules and logistics involved. ❖

For more information, contact andy_hoang@brown.edu, or visit <https://sites.google.com/a/brown.edu/phr/brown>

Asylum Training: Documenting Torture and Other Human Rights Abuses



PROGRAM Forensic medical evaluators and legal experts will train conference participants in the skills needed to diagnose, evaluate and document the physical and psychological after-effects of torture and severe human rights violations in order to create a pool of trained evaluators in the state. [View program brochure](#)

WHEN Sat., February 8, 2014, 9 am to 5 pm

WHERE Alpert Medical School, 222 Richmond St., Providence

COST \$40 residents; \$60 medical and legal professionals (Includes program, parking, breakfast, lunch)

SPEAKERS

Joanne Ahola, MD, Medical director, Weill Cornell Center for Human Rights

Jillian Tuck, JD, Asylum Program Manager, Physicians for Human Rights

Sarah Kimball, MD, MPH, Asylum network trainer, Physicians for Human Rights