

Symposium | Asylum and Mental Disorders : [Symposium 65] Assessment and care for asylum seekers with severe mental health problems

📅 Sat. Sep 27, 2025 10:40 AM - 12:10 PM JST | Sat. Sep 27, 2025 1:40 AM - 3:10 AM UTC 🏛️ Session Room 6 (Conference Room B)

[Symposium 65] Assessment and care for asylum seekers with severe mental health problems

Moderator: Seline van den Ameele (Department of Psychiatry and Medical Psychology, University Hospital Brugmann, Brussels Collaborative Antwerp Psychiatric Research Institute (CAPRI), Antwerp University, Antwerp)

[SY-65-03] Barriers to mental health care for asylum seekers and how to overcome them: an introduction

*Laura Van de Vliet¹ (1. PZ St. Alexius Grimbergen (Belgium))

Keywords : Cultural psychiatry, Asylum seekers, Mental healthcare

The number of forcibly displaced people has been increasing progressively in recent years. In 2024 there were 8.4 million asylum seekers among the 123.2 million forcibly displaced people worldwide. Refugees and asylum seekers often have to cope with traumatic events such as conflict, loss or separation from family, life-threatening migration journeys and lengthy asylum procedures during their migration experience. A sizable proportion are therefore at risk of developing psychological symptoms and major mental illness. A recent meta-analysis reports high prevalence rates of psychiatric problems among asylum seekers, with 25,5% of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and 30,1% of depression. Despite the high prevalence of mental health illness, asylum seekers' use of mental health services remains low. A notion of possible barriers to mental health care for asylum seekers is therefore necessary. Based on a literature review, we structured the barriers to mental health care for asylum seekers around following 6 central themes: "lack of knowledge of the healthcare system and healthcare rights", "language barriers", "expressions of psychological distress and illness explanations", "expectations about therapeutic relationship and treatment", "lack of trust and stigma", "structural difficulties". In order to overcome those barriers we developed a clinical model that fosters a close collaboration between a psychiatric clinic and the Belgian agency for the reception of asylum seekers. Hence, we provide psychiatric care for asylum seekers with severe mental illness through both in- and outpatient settings. We don't look for a one-size-fits all approach, but we adapt our care to the unique person and his or her needs. In addition we coach teams working in regular psychiatric care settings as well as in asylum centers in how to deal with these severe mental health conditions in a culturally sensitive way.