Amazing courage in the Calais ‘Jungle’

Holly Howe recalls the illnesses, injuries and resilience of the people she encountered as a volunteer at a migrant camp

Being in the Calais migrant camp, or ‘Jungle’ as it is sometimes known, is not like being in France at all. Driving into the camp is like crossing the border to a different continent.

There is a whole world inside the camp – small shops, cafés, a church, a mosque and a library called Jungle Books where English and French are taught. It all reflects people’s resilience and how they manage to adapt to life in the Jungle.

The clinic – a series of tents and chalets – sits inside the camp. When I was working there in August and September last year, patients would queue every morning outside the first tent, where a triage nurse prioritised urgent cases and made appointments with the appropriate professional. We tended to have about 70-100 appointments every day.

Volunteer mediators ensured the smooth running of the clinic and drove people from the clinic to the emergency department and other local health services as needed.

On every patient’s notes we documented whether their presenting complaint was secondary to their living conditions in Calais, the journey they had endured, contact with the police or ‘other’.

The most common condition we saw at the clinic was scabies (‘la gale’ in French), which is spread through skin-to-skin contact and sharing clothes, towels and bedding. This is difficult to avoid in the camp, as clean clothes and bedding are not available.

Camp life

I met three young men from Afghanistan aged between 16 and 20 who had come to Calais alone, but met each other in the camp. They said they were brothers now.

They came to the clinic frequently for treatment for scabies, but the condition never cleared up because they were wearing the same clothes, sleeping in the same tent and using the same bed sheets.

Many people came complaining of sore throats caused by the camp’s poor air quality, and we saw endless coughs and colds. These required rest, warmth and good food, none which could be guaranteed at the camp.

We saw a large number of similar injuries: deep lacerations on the palms of the hands, the result of attempts to climb barbed wire fences. Other injuries were sustained when falling from trains and ferries. Several patients presented with broken feet and ankles.

I met two men, one from Eritrea and one from Kosovo, each with one leg in a cast. They would come to the clinic every morning for their anticoagulant injection and then go to the library together for French lessons. Both wanted asylum in France and were working hard to learn the language.

I tried to create a relaxed environment during wound care, sometimes playing music and chatting to the patient. Often patients would talk to me about their journey from home to Calais and what they had been through.

I was amazed by their courage and resilience.

To the morning clinics with injuries caused by fighting the police the previous night. Many injuries were caused by being hit with police batons or sprayed with tear gas.

It was heartbreaking that many of the people were not surprised by this poor treatment – they thought that because they were refugees, they had no rights. Mediators took testimonies from those who had been involved in the violence, partly to empower people and convince them that they do have rights.

Leaving Calais felt strange. I had spent six weeks in a place where people’s motivation was the chance of crossing the Channel or finding a safe home. Every day I heard how life in the UK was the end goal of their difficult and dangerous journey.

When it was time for me to leave, I felt uncomfortable about how easy it was for me to travel back to London. Although the days were long and the work was heartbreaking, the clinic is helping to fill a great need and I am proud to have been a nurse there.

Staff nurse Holly Howe completed a six-week volunteer placement at the Calais migrant camp’s clinic. She found the work heartbreaking, but was amazed by the resilience of the people living in the camp.

Author

Holly Howe (pictured) is a staff nurse in London.

SUMMARY

The people she encountered as a volunteer at a migrant camp

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