

**This is the unedited version of a column which appeared in *Australian Doctor* in 2004. Minor changes may have been made to the published piece.**

### **Media Bites: These changing times**

Twenty years ago, when Dr Edward Ryan first set up shop on Crown Street in inner Sydney, the people he saw were very different to those he now treats.

Dr Ryan, a history enthusiast, was fascinated by the stories of the Greeks, the Turks and other migrants, and often documented their histories on tape.

Many of his patients lived in boarding houses in the rambling terraces lining the grand old street.

Like so much of our inner cities, Crown Street has been transformed in recent years. Now it is lined by trendy cafes, galleries, and boutiques, and these days Dr Ryan's clientele are healthier, and more affluent and demanding.

But his bright airy rooms still hear their share of stories of dislocation and trauma.

Word has spread that Dr Ryan is part of a small network of doctors willing to waive fees in order to provide care to those asylum seekers without access to many basic services, including Medicare.

Dr Ryan, 57, has seen the most horrendous scars, physical and psychological, in those who have been the victims of torture and other trauma. Despite his busy practice, he spends hours on the phone negotiating with hospitals and other services on their behalf.

He remembers the pregnant woman with severe hypertension that no hospital wanted to admit, and the patients who have tried to kill themselves, after being unable to get help for severe psychological problems.

It is the children who distress him the most. "They are quite traumatised by the psychological problems that their parents are going through," he

says. “The kids are very introverted and frightened and have poor communication skills.”

Dr Ryan receives a special mention in the 2003 annual report of the Asylum Seekers Centre, which is within walking distance of his surgery. The report tells distressing stories of suffering under Australia’s current policies. Many of its clients are not allowed to work, to receive welfare benefits, or to access Medicare.

But the Centre also notes the generosity of many in supporting its work: “One large firm allows staff an extended lunch break, thus providing a time that they are able to attend the Centre and assist with English language support,” says the report. “Academics, medical practitioners, barristers, retirees, parents, students, gardeners, folk from every profession and from every faith offer service and kindness.”

One case not mentioned in the report is of an asylum seeker in his 60s who developed a blocked prostate last year and was admitted to a public hospital in Sydney. He was discharged, not because it was clinically appropriate, but because of his Medicare status.

Eventually, the man had surgery at the Mater Hospital, thanks to the generosity of the hospital and associated doctors in waiving their fees, estimated at several thousand dollars in total.

The Centre’s co-ordinator Ms Sylvia Winton says the main change in her work with refugees over the past ten years is that she now regularly hears them wish they had never come here.

“For them and for many Australians there is disbelief in the harshness of our policies. It is time to wonder if Australia is a civil society,” she says.

It is a question also on Dr Ryan’s mind. “It is a basic tenet of mankind that we should be able to offer health services to everyone regardless of who they are,” he says.

And there is my wish for the New Year: that politicians seeking to woo the so-called aspirational classes can also spare some concern for those aspiring to the most basic of human rights.

(More information is at: [www.asylumseekerscentre.org.au](http://www.asylumseekerscentre.org.au))

