Initial Care to Illegal Immigrants Who Arrive in Europe on Small Boats. What are Nurses Doing?

Maria Del Mar Jiménez Lasserrotte¹ and José Granero Molina²

¹Department of Health and Disaster Relief, Spanish Red Cross, Spain
²Physiotherapy and Medicine Department, Faculty of Health Sciences, Spain

Corresponding author: José Granero Molina, Physiotherapy and Medicine Department. Almería University, Carretera Sacramento, S/Nº, La cañada de San Urbano (04120), Almería, Spain, Tel: +34 950 214588; E-mail: jgranero@ual.es

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While the route of entry of irregular immigration can be by air, land or sea; the latter presents a high humanitarian and health problem risk [5,6]. In the so-called ‘pateras de la muerte’ (small boats of death) thousands of people try to go across the sea bound for Europe; those who do not die trying arrive in extremely precarious conditions, needing care. Be it in open sea or upon arrival to the coast [7], their basic health needs must be fulfilled by providing food, drink, basic hygiene measures, shelter or communication [8,9]. Although many studies highlight that in spite of the distances and the travel conditions, only a small percentage of the immigrants that arrive on small boats require urgent healthcare [10,11]; many of them carry chronic health problems, illnesses or endemic diseases, becoming healthcare subsidiaries [12-14].

Faced with this situation, the Spanish Red Cross saw the need to organize this aid, signing an agreement with the Spanish government to provide care for the immigrants who arrive on Spanish coastlines on small boats. Within the Project of Immediate Emergency Response Teams (ERIES for its abbreviation in Spanish), the branch of Humanitarian Aid to Immigrants (ERIE-AHI for its abbreviation in Spanish) was created, equipped with teams who are available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year [8]. These teams perform different tasks by the beach or at the port. Humanitarian Support: they provide food and drink, items for hygiene, dry clothes or childcare kits (food, clothes and footwear). Healthcare: they dispense first aid, basic care and vital support or stabilization measures, preparation and transfer to a hospital if needed. Social Mediation: tasks of interpretation between the newly arrived immigrants and the healthcare team, psychological support, information and guidance, paying special attention to minors and women.

The participation of nurses in these teams is constant, being responsible for tasks of triage, mediation and healthcare on all levels. Although at times serious cases, severe pathologies in need of first aid or RCP are treated [15], most actions cover basic healthcare needs such as mild respiratory insufficiency, dehydration, malnutrition, hypothermia, urinary retention or burns sustained during the trip [16]. That is why the nurses themselves are considering the design and validation of the assessment tools that, based on the human needs described by Virginia Henderson, can give support to their tasks of attention and care for these immigrants that arrive on small boats.

On the other hand, while more studies on the problems of illegal immigration to European coasts are needed, there is a severe shortage of research projects that incorporate the point of view of all of those involved in the process of aid. The experiences of law enforcement, healthcare staff, volunteers, mediators and even that of the immigrants themselves need to be known [17], to determine which health needs...
must be addressed, as well as to better coordinate actions in order to improve results.

In that sense, there are many factors to explore such as: basic first aid training, the detection of life-threatening diseases or the use of protection materials by the people providing care. The attention to the urgent need for hydration or the cultural adaptation of the food provided. The scarce attention given to needs of elimination. The attention to move and maintain postures, which is essential after an overcrowded journey with absolute immobility. The condition of extreme fatigue in which they arrive points to the need for sleep and rest as fundamental. To this hypothermia is added, the result of a long journey at low temperatures which can lead them to the verge of death. The bad health and hygiene conditions of the journey, which point to the need to assess the hygiene and integrity of the skin [18]. After a journey where they risk their lives, the need to communicate with their families or acquaintances, or expressing emotions and fears, cannot be forgotten either [19-21]. Their spiritual needs and values must also be taken into account.

In addition, other phases of the aid given to these immigrants that arrive on small boats are not known and should be explored. Such is the case of the attention to their healthcare needs during the phase of police custody, the cultural adaptation of the healthcare systems, or the improvement to protocols and care infrastructure both in the maritime rescue boats as well as in the port facilities where the Red Cross cares for them. To this is added that, the care provided to immigrants is a good moment to detect new public health problems, like human trafficking, especially of women and children, by organized mafias [22].

In a context of severe world economic recession [23], illegal immigration is a growing phenomenon which creates serious public health problems in Western countries [24,25]. Nurses are playing a major role in the aid and care provided for immigrants and/or refugees, which should be broadcast and valued before the international community [26]. On the front lines, the nurses make up a core pillar in the prevention, diagnosis, aid and care of great health problems of our time, such as the case of those created by large migratory influxes.

References