Biocultural Anthropology

A Gap in Sudanese Refugee Resettlement

The civil war in Sudan has left hundreds of thousands dead and uprooted more than 2.5 million people. Most of the displaced people find their way into refugee camps in nearby countries to await resettlement. The United States is home to more than 20,000 of these resettled refugees, who represent more than ten southern Sudanese ethnic groups. Of these, approximately 50% live in Nebraska, largely because of the state’s low cost of living, low unemployment levels, and low crime rates.

The state of Nebraska’s Minority Health Office sought help in incorporating this growing refugee population into the public health system. To do this, they contacted a local anthropologist, Mary Willis, from the University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL), who had conducted fieldwork with refugees in Africa. Willis began by convening focus groups aimed at identifying refugee health issues. One concern of Nebraskans and Sudanese alike was the refugees’ teeth or, rather, their lack thereof. A majority of Nebraska’s Sudanese refugees are Nuer or Dinka, and as do many other Nilotic populations, they practice dental extraction. Among the Dinka, this involves the removal of the lower front teeth, while the Nuer remove those teeth as well as the upper canines, eight teeth in all. This dental practice is part of a coming-of-age ceremony for both boys and girls and a crucial component of tribal identity, adulthood, and beauty.

However, according to Willis, for the many Dinka and Nuer who have relocated to the United States, the lack of teeth is problematic. Typical U.S. foods require the front teeth for processing; the inability to bite into food could mean a less healthy diet. Also, many U.S. foods are harder than traditional Sudanese foods such as porridges, milk, and stews. Perhaps more importantly, dental gaps have social implications in the United States. Individuals with missing teeth face negative stereotypes related to intelligence, attractiveness, and health, just to name a few, and the Sudanese refugees are suffering the consequences of these stereotypical judgments.

Because Willis realized the importance of the anterior teeth for physical and mental health in the United States and because of the growing number of requests she received from refugees to have their teeth replaced, she arranged complete dental restorations for five refugees at UNL’s College of Dentistry in 2003. Word of mouth created such an overwhelming demand for implant restoration that Willis sought support and was awarded $230,000 from the Langeloth Foundation to assist 23 more refugees. A new grant is in the works to fit more than 100

A patient inspects his new dental work.

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