

When lockdown measures were put in place in Denmark, a section of the population was neglected – homeless migrants. The Red Cross Health Clinics in Denmark came up against an array of challenges in catering for the needs of this group. Attempting to secure a space in which these people could quarantine without investigation into their legal status was one such challenge. Providing supports for this group proved to be a minefield and made clear the deep flaws in the government's lockdown measures.

THE HOMELESS MIGRANTS LEFT IN THE LURCH IN DENMARK



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LOCKDOWN MEASURES IN DENMARK

On Wednesday 11th March 2020, the Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen held a press conference, where she announced that Denmark would be locked down and all country borders would be closed to minimise the further spread of the COVID-19 virus. By Friday 13th March, all schools, day care centres, educational establishments and most workplaces in Denmark had to close indefinitely, and people had to stay at home. Only necessary functions in the country remained open such as public transport, grocery stores, nursing homes and of course the hospitals and medical facilities to take care of the most vulnerable part of the population. With regards to the "most vulnerable", the Prime Minister had the elderly and the chronically ill in mind, but did not have the socially vulnerable in mind at all - the homeless Danes and migrants. In the debate about COVID-19 and how to deal with the infection, hardly anyone thought about supporting and protecting the socially vulnerable or addressing their situation. As an example, when Danish society locked down, all public toilets and many drop-in centres, such as the day shelters supporting homeless people, were all closed, and most of the public employees who supported the homeless and migrants were sent home indefinitely.

DANISH RED CROSS'S HEALTH CLINICS


In 2011 the Danish Red Cross established health clinics for people in Denmark without public registration or a civil society number, and thus do not have access to any public health care services except emergency care. The Red Cross Clinics are run in collaboration with the Danish Refugee Council and the Danish Medical Association.

They are run purely by professionals who volunteer such as doctors, nurses, midwives, dentists, physiotherapists and bioanalysts. Only the manager and a few other employees are paid staff.

In March 2020 when it was decided that Denmark would lock down to minimise the spread of COVID-19, it was immediately decided to keep the clinics open to make sure that migrants were still able to access medical care. The first month after the lock down started was a nightmare, with a lot of unsolved issues. Who would take care of the homeless migrants who had contracted COVID-19? Where could migrants use a toilet? Where could they sleep and be provided with food? The Danish Government and the Danish Health Authorities advised everyone to stay at home, keep their distance and maintain proper hand hygiene. But how could migrants follow this advice and take their precautions without a home or any access to a bathroom to wash their hands? What if they were infected? Where could they quarantine so that they did not infect others? All these questions were left unanswered and confusion was spreading at once with the virus.

The Red Cross Health Clinic, which has a clinic in Copenhagen, Aarhus and Odense, therefore decided to stay open, and made sure both volunteers and patients were kept safe from COVID-19 infection by maintaining proper distance regulations and providing personal protective equipment. To take the necessary precautions to avoid COVID-19 infection in the Red Cross Clinics, only a few patients were allowed into the clinic at a time and all patients were asked at the entrance if they had any symptoms COVID-19. If they had, the patient had to wait outside, and the medical doctor would examine the patient, wearing protective equipment. It was difficult to find facemasks, gowns and hand sanitizer since the demand was very high and the supply level was insufficient, as protective equipment was mainly reserved for vital functions such as hospitals.





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It was not possible to test for COVID-19 in the Red Cross Clinics, and the only option in the case of a suspected infection was to advise the patient to go home and isolate indoors until the symptoms disappeared. This was another difficult thing to do, while we were well aware that many of our patients do not have a home in Denmark. In the case of a severe COVID-19 infection, patients could call the emergency services and be admitted to hospital, since it would then be considered an emergency and would be covered by the Danish Public Health system.

THE SHORTCOMINGS OF GOVERNMENT POLICY

The best practice for handling a patient with a suspected COVID-19 infection, but with no home in which to self-isolate was unclear, and still is. The municipality of Copenhagen was therefore approached to find out if any considerations had been made regarding the matter. The reality was that a COVID-19 homeless person who had contracted the virus, who could not quarantine indoors, could walk the streets, which poses a risk to the rest of the population. Not having a family doctor to call and facing language barriers would also mean that they did not have access to correct information and to medical advice.

The authorities in the Danish municipalities did not have an answer to this question, since most public employees had been sent home and no one had created a plan. The municipality also did not respond to the countless inquiries to open the public toilets. Many homeless migrants had understood the message - remember to wash your hands - but they had nowhere to do it.

It seemed there were no limits to the laws and regulations the Danish government could implement during the lockdown to minimise the spread of infection and take care of the vulnerable elderly and chronically ill Danish citizens. The pressure on Red Cross clinics and on some of the private drop-in centres for homeless migrants only grew under the lockdown. What would happen if the COVID-19 pandemic spread amongst the population of homeless migrants? Several aid organizations tried to get an answer from the Minister of Foreign Affairs as to whether emergency shelters could be established for homeless migrants. The answer was short and straight – No! The explanation was that it was not possible to suspend laws and regulations in Denmark that prohibit the provision of shelter to illegal immigrants. On the other hand, several cities in Denmark had established places for the homeless Danish citizens to quarantine.



The condition on which any patient could be admitted to such a quarantine centre was that their legal status would be investigated and without visa in Denmark, the patient would be detained and eventually sent to their home country. Due to these conditions, admitting a patient to such a centre was not an option for the Red Cross clinics, since the clinics guarantee safe medical treatment without Danish authorities being involved. If any patient were sent into quarantine with the authorities, patients would not dare to use the clinic in the future.

CASES AMONG THE MIGRANT POPULATION

Over a month after the lockdown was set in place in March 2020, most public toilets were reopened -so far so good. But the fear of meeting an infected homeless migrant still lurked. How could patients be supported if they had the virus? One weekend in April 2020, panic broke in a small private drop-in centre with accommodation for migrants. A group of 16 migrants had been tested for COVID-19 and at least 12 of them had tested positive. Those who had tested positive to COVID-19 could not stay at the drop-in centre, as this would put others at risk of infection.

All conceivable health authorities were called and finally, access to the municipality's quarantine sites for homeless people was granted. When the centre opened, other problems arose. Many of these migrants who tested positive did not believe the COVID-19 results, since they did not experience any symptoms or signs of illness. The infected persons had been promised that Danish authorities would not be involved, but an employee at the quarantine centre investigated their residence status. Staying in Denmark on a legal basis was a difficult task for many, since the Danish borders had remained closed. Most had stayed more than the permitted three months in Denmark.

CONCLUSION

Fortunately, COVID-19 has not hit the group of homeless migrants in Denmark so far. In the Red Cross clinics only, a few patients with possible symptoms have shown up, but none with severe symptoms. The reason COVID-19 has not in the migrant population might be due to the little contact between homeless migrants and Danish citizens.

The COVID-19 infection amongst the regular immigrant population in Denmark might have spread due to several factors, for example immigrants often have jobs in establishments that did not close during the lockdown. Some have poor access to healthcare and poor health conditions. Several immigrant women are employed in nursing homes where protective equipment was scarce. Others are employed in supermarkets where they come into contact with many people. Men are sometimes employed as taxi drivers, run small grocery stores and the like - all these jobs involve contact with other people. Additionally, many immigrant families live in small, overcrowded apartments with little space to isolate themselves from the rest of the family.

In retrospect, it must be stated that the Danish government acted wisely by shutting down Danish society quickly. Many measures were swiftly taken to protect the vulnerable - elderly and chronically ill citizens. However, there were no plans or considerations made for the homeless migrants. It was as though these people did not exist at all, at least from the politicians' and the responsible authorities' points of view. What would have happened if the pandemic had hit homeless migrants? Even more frightening is the fact that there is still no plan for homeless migrants if a second wave of COVID-19 hits Denmark.

