

The difficult process of providing aid to Syria



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The crisis in Syria continues to dominate many news headlines and few of us can be unaware of the plight of the hundreds of thousands who have either been displaced internally or who have escaped the conflict by seeking refuge in neighbouring countries. Britain, Germany, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and the USA are just some who have pledged to help fund humanitarian efforts for those still in Syria, as well as the refugees now in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Iraq.

I read with interest the Médecins Sans Frontières article in the last issue of *Middle East Health* about the situation in Lebanon and the frustrations the aid agencies there are experiencing due to the need for refugees to be registered before assistance can be given. As Durbin's 'NGO's and Charities' division has been involved in the supply of medicines to Syria itself, I thought I would share something about the process that we have to go through in conjunction with the aid agencies and freight forwarding companies to get medicines into the country and the difficulties

that we also face.

With more than half the public hospitals having been damaged or destroyed, and medical supplies already severely low, getting fresh supplies into Syria and to the right areas, is of vital importance. Unfortunately for those who have been injured in the conflict however, practicality and politics do not always work in tandem. With aid workers, depots and vehicles all having come under fire at times, the logistics of supplying a country in crisis is not always a straight forward exercise, and the planning process can be a complex one.

For Durbin it begins by working closely with the aid agencies to provide exactly what items they need in the required quantities. As straight forward as this may seem it is crucial that we can be relied upon to work speedily and get this right, and it is where our long experience in sourcing quality pharmaceuticals worldwide comes into its own. For the Syrian crisis this has mainly been large volumes of antibiotics, painkillers and anaesthetics plus disinfectants, bandages and other consumable items. Due to trade embargoes that are in place from the EU, UN and other countries, we then need to obtain permission from the British Government 'Export Control Organisation' before any shipment can go ahead. Exemptions are in place for medicines, but as embargo regulations can be complex and subject to change, being familiar with these is essential. The need to supply accurate and detailed paperwork is paramount or unnecessary delays can occur.

How to ship is the next consideration but with Damascus Airport closed the alternatives have been limited. Cold storage items are being flown into Beirut and then by refrigerated truck from there, but for practical reasons including cost, most bulk shipments are having to go by

sea to Latakia port. It is at this point that most delays have occurred so far unfortunately, as the aid agencies have to apply for a duty waiver before any goods can be cleared and at times the process has been painfully slow. With most agencies having limited staff 'on the ground' due to safety concerns, onward transportation is then often being placed with local hauliers, although 'local knowledge' can of course be an advantage here. Some aid is getting through to where it needs to be thankfully, but the whole process is more long winded than any of those involved would wish it and inevitably delays mean lost lives.

It is heartening none-the-less to know that the world has not given up on the many who have been left suffering due to the Syrian crisis. Contributions continue to pour in from around the globe and organisations like the United Nations, Médecins Sans Frontières, the Red Cross, Islamic Relief, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and others, continue to co-ordinate relief efforts despite all the difficulties, frustrations and setbacks that they face on a daily basis. We should all feel proud of the work they do on our behalf. **MEH**

Durbin PLC is a British company based in South Harrow, London. Established in 1963, the company specialises in supplying quality assured pharmaceuticals, medical equipment and consumable supplies to healthcare professionals and aid agencies in over 180 countries. As well as reacting rapidly to emergency situations, Durbin PLC responds to healthcare supply needs from local project level to national scale programmes.
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