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Do physicians and other health care personnel have ethical obligations towards migrants?

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Given the present migration crisis, health care personnel working in developed countries encounter patients with a history of migration even more frequently than in the past. From the 8.4 million persons living in Switzerland, 2.1 million persons (25%) are of foreign origin, and thus are deemed to be immigrants (includes both economic migrants and refugees). Differences exist concerning legal protections and degrees of vulnerability among different subgroups of migrants. A number of ethical issues arise including access to health care. This article explores necessary definitions, in particular the difference between migrants and refugees, and illustrates facts health care personnel should know when facing migrant patients. After a brief summary of the international legal framework, an analysis and recommendations are presented as regards ethical obligations of health care personnel towards migrant populations in hospitals and outpatient care.

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