

Transcending Borders

By Michele Chabin

In early June, Mohammed, a 4-year-old boy from southwestern Syria with a heart-melting smile and sparkling dark eyes, fell to the ground, his body wracked with intractable seizures. Mohammed's parents rushed him to the local hospital, where the doctors said they could do nothing to help him.

Their only hope, they were told, was to transport Mohammed to a top-notch facility in the capital city of Damascus, or to Jordan.

But, that wasn't an option.

"The civil war has made it impossible to travel to Damascus, and the hospitals in Jordan weren't ready to accept us," said Mohammed's father, Abu Mohammed, whose name, like his son's, has been changed so as not to endanger them.

"Then I came in contact with an official at the Red Cross, who helped us gain entry to Israel," he said.

The official contacted the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), which, since April 2013, has maintained a field hospital for wounded Syrian civilians on the Israel-Syria border. Although Mohammed wasn't a casualty of the war, the IDF nevertheless agreed to permit him and his father to enter Israel, where the boy was rushed to the Western Galilee Medical Center in Nahariya, a northern Israeli town near the Lebanon border.

The boy spent 10 days in pediatric intensive care, where doctors managed to bring his seizures under control. When he suddenly developed paralysis of all four limbs, the doctors discovered a previously undiagnosed malformation of his spinal column and scheduled surgery.

Conflicting Feelings

Catching a breeze in the hospital's garden, Mohammed, presurgery, was lying almost motionless but smiling in a reclining wheelchair. Abu Mohammed recalled his conflicted feelings when he learned his son could receive free medical care in Israel.

"I was raised to believe Jews and Israel are the enemy, that Israel is a monster that stole our land and divided our families. But, when we arrived, I realized that Israel and Israelis

Photos by Debbie Hill



Israeli Hospitals Treat Syrians, Palestinians

This page: Syrian father Abu Mohammed wheels his son, Mohammed, back to the children's department of Western Galilee Hospital in Nahariya, Israel.

Left: Dr. Samuel Tobias, senior neurosurgeon at Western Galilee Hospital in Nahariya, Israel.



aren't like that. Everyone we've encountered at the hospital has been warm, caring and supportive."

Mohammed is one of the more than 330 Syrian patients who have been treated at Western Galilee Medical Center. In all, more than 700 Syrians have received treatment at Western Galilee, Rebecca Sieff Hospital in Safed, Poriya Hospital in Tiberias and Rambam Medical Center in Haifa.

Last year, 112,500 Palestinians were admitted to Israel for treatment on humanitarian grounds, among them the 1-year-old granddaughter of Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh who had developed a life-threatening infection.

In 2012, Haniyeh's brother-in-law opted to seek treatment for a life-threatening heart condition in Israel rather than Egypt, according to Al Arabiya News. Thousands more, including some Palestinians, come to Israel as so-called "medical tourists."

They are drawn to Israel because the quality of care is very high while the price of procedures is usually much lower in Israel than in the United States and many other parts of the world.

For non-Israelis, a single fertility treatment that may cost \$15,000 to \$20,000 in the United

States costs about a third of that amount in Israel, and the success rate is among the highest in the world. Many surgeries in Israel cost a fraction of what they cost in the United States.

How much money Israeli medical facilities receive from foreign patients varies greatly. Medical tourists bring coveted revenue to both public and private Israeli hospitals that are chronically short of funding.

Tikkun Olam in Action

Humanitarian cases, in contrast, do not generate a profit but are instead an expression of tikkun olam, the Jewish imperative to "repair the world" through acts of generosity and kindness. While medical personnel say it is naïve to believe that patients from countries with no diplomatic ties to Israel become goodwill ambassadors for Israel upon discharge, many patients say the time they spend in Israeli hospitals challenges their preconceived notions about the country and its people.

"We don't have any kind of financial interest in treating humanitarian patients. Quite the opposite, since we have less time to treat patients in our private clinics," explained Dr. Sion Hourri, head of the pediatric intensive care unit at Wolfson Medical Center in Holon and a co-founder of Save a Child's Heart (SACH), a non-governmental organization whose physicians have performed life-saving cardiac surgery on 3,400 patients from 48 developing countries since 1996, including 200 from Iraq and a handful from Syria.

SACH's physicians and nurses, who are Wolfson staffers, perform the surgeries on a voluntary basis. Some 50 percent of the 200 to 250 children operated on each year are Palestinian, while 40 percent hail from Africa.

The program's funding comes from a range of sources: private and family foundations, the Israel Ministry for Regional Cooperation (for Palestinian and Iraqi children) and the European Union (which pays for Palestinian children). The Palestinian Authority sponsors surgeries for some Palestinian children.

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But, because Wolfson—like Western Galilee Medical Center—is a government-funded facility, it is actually the Israeli government that underwrites the bulk of the costs.

Houri said he and his colleagues became “addicted” to delivering humanitarian medical care in 1997, after operating on a group of children from Ethiopia with severe heart disease.

“We went back to Ethiopia to examine a new set of prospective patients and to check on the first group of patients we operated on in 1996,” Houri said. “When we saw the children, who had been so ill, playing soccer, we realized what effect our work had on the kids’ lives and were hooked.”

Houri said that when it comes to caring for sick children, “politics don’t come into play. A kid is a kid, no matter what his parents think or do,” even when Israel is at war.

Not that there aren’t challenges to treating patients whose nations are technically or actually at war with Israel.

Keeping Politics Outside

Houri recalled how, during Israel’s war with Hamas in 2012, an air-raid siren wailed, signaling an incoming rocket, just minutes after the latest group of Palestinian children had arrived. They were quickly moved into a reinforced safe area of the hospital.

“There have been times,” said Sarah Paparin, who handles international affairs at Western Galilee Medical Center, “when our staff treated Hezbollah terrorists. Politics stay outside.”

It isn’t surprising then, that throughout this summer’s war with Hamas, Israeli hospitals continued to treat numerous Palestinian civilians from the West Bank. One of them was Janette Dieq, a 36-year-old resident of Bethlehem.

Lying in her bed in the hematology oncology ward at Hadassah Medical Center in Jerusalem, Dieq related how she recently received a bone marrow transplant at the hospital in an attempt to cure her relapsing leukemia.

Symbols of her Greek Orthodox faith scattered around the room, Dieq said Israeli authorities

readily agreed to grant her an entry permit to receive treatment at what she called “the best place to get the best treatment.”

The young mother said the war “was never mentioned in conversations” with staff or other patients and that “what happens outside the hospital stays outside the hospital. The staff has never looked at the nationality or religion of a patient. There isn’t any Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Palestinian. I know I’m receiving the best possible care, even better than back home.”

As her daughter, 8-year-old Roleen, watched a cartoon in her hospital room in the pediatric oncology ward, Radir Harvush, from the West Bank city of Ramallah, said she had never been to Israel before Roleen became ill with a life-threatening disease of the immune system.

The fact that she is Palestinian and speaks only Arabic “hasn’t been a problem because there are so many Arab patients, staff and cleaners. All patients are treated equally here, and I am grateful,” she said, gazing at Roleen, whose smile lights up a room, despite the fact that her skin is covered in disfiguring splotches.

Roleen has been hospitalized for 14 months, with no end in sight.

Dalia Basa, who coordinates the treatment of Palestinian patients with the Israeli and Palestinian ministries of health, said Palestinians and others choose treatment in Israel “because the medical care here is very good. When there is a disaster in Turkey or Haiti, we help, so how can we not help our neighbors?”



Eight-year-old Palestinian Roleen Harvush, from Ramallah, West Bank, in her bed in the pediatric oncology department in Hadassah Medical Center’s Ein Kerem campus in Jerusalem.



Staff members at Western Galilee say they are pleased to be able to treat the Syrians, many of whom have arrived with hatchet or close-range bullet wounds. Some also have antibiotic-resistant infections.

Dr. Samuel Tobias, a senior neurosurgeon at Western Galilee, said his patients often arrive unconscious and when they wake up in Israel “may be afraid of being tortured. They were taught Jews wiped out all the Arabs in Israel, so they’re shocked when they see Arab patients and staff all over the hospital.”

Dr. Eyal Sela, a head and neck surgeon, checks a Syrian patient whose face was severely damaged in Syria, at Western Galilee Hospital.

Complex Injuries, and an Uncertain Future

The vast majority of Syrian patients who make it to Israel survive their complex injuries and

are released after days, weeks or even months of treatment with medical supplies and, in some cases, equipment like a prosthesis, and a thorough discharge plan in Arabic. But they still face an uncertain future health-wise when they return home.

One recent patient, an adult male, spent nearly three months at the hospital, where doctors painstakingly reconstructed part of his blown-off jaw and lower eyelid, injuries suffered from gunshot wounds. The jaw was reconstructed from part of his leg bone.

The patient was expected back in Israel a second time, to undergo tooth implantation, said Dr. Eyal Sela, a head and neck surgeon.

He noted that the vast majority of Syrian patients are unable to return for follow-up care because the trip to the Israeli border is too fraught with danger from Syrian military forces, Islamic militants and rebels.

Pushing 4-year-old Mohammed in his wheelchair through the children’s ward, filled with Israeli Jewish and Arab children and parents, his father expressed regret that Syria’s hostile relationship with Israel made it unsafe for him to provide his real name, or to have his face shown in a photograph.

“The truth is, all the people in my village of 3,500 know we’re here, and they support my decision to come, but the situation is dangerous.”

Pausing to adjust Mohammed’s stiff neck brace when the boy whimpered from discomfort, the father said he sometimes imagines his family living in northern Israel, which has a high proportion of Arab citizens.

“If I could, I would bring my wife and other child here, but I know that will never happen,” he said. 🇮🇱



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