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Darfur refugee youth gets life-saving heart surgery

By JUDY SIEGEL-ITZKOVICH

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An 18-year-old refugee from the horrors of Darfur in Sudan underwent free, minimally invasive heart surgery on Wednesday at Holon's Wolfson Medical Center, through the Save a Child's Heart (SACH) organization.

Jamal Mohammed, who lives near the central bus station in rundown south Tel Aviv, left Sudan without his parents and seven siblings to cross the Egyptian border into Israel a few months ago.

When he left, he was unaware of his heart condition, though he did suffer from certain symptoms that later proved threatening to his life.

After being examined by cardiologists at Beersheba's Soroka University Medical Center, he was told that his only chance for survival was to undergo catheterization and have a tiny "umbrella" installed in a coronary artery.

As a refugee with no health insurance or money, he could not have dreamed of undergoing such a procedure. But SACH's chief cardiologist Dr. Akiva Tamir, Wolfson's chief of pediatric cardiology - and other staffers - volunteered to perform the surgery, and the AGA Medical Corporation donated the expensive "umbrella" device.

When asked about his past and his family, Jamal was unable to find the words to answer. However, he told a SACH volunteer that he was very grateful. If his recovery goes as hoped, he will continue his life as a normal and healthy young man.

SACH is an Israel-based international humanitarian project that provides life-saving heart surgeries and follow-up care for children from developing countries who suffer from congenital heart disease, with a mission to create centers of competence in these countries. The hospital-based project includes a team of some 70 dedicated experts who - from chief surgeon to physiotherapist - contribute a substantial portion of their time without any payment from SACH.

The group (www.saveachildsheart.com) was founded by the late Wolfson pediatric surgeon Dr. Amram (Ami) Cohen, who, while serving in the US armed forces in Korea in 1988, was approached by the head of the international organization Save the Hearts.

The organization was sending orphaned and indigent Korean children to Western countries for medical care not available locally.

Cohen was so impressed with the idea that he requested and received permission from

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his superiors to participate in the program, and during the rest of his time in Korea performed 35 pediatric cardiac surgeries.

Cohen arrived on aliya from the US in 1992, saw the need for such free services to needy children and teens around the world, and quickly collected volunteers to set it up at his hospital.

He died in a tragic accident while climbing the Kilimanjaro Mountain in 2001 when he was Wolfson's deputy chief of cardiovascular surgery and head of pediatric cardiac surgery.

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