

Israeli doctors perform heart surgery on Iraqi children

By SHERI SHEFA, Staff Reporter, The Canadian Jewish News

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Five-month-old Tara is being cradled by her mother in cardiology clinic in Amman, Jordan, set up by Save A Child's Heart. [Sheila Shalhevet photo]

Israeli doctors made international headlines last week when two Iraqi children were brought to Israel for emergency heart surgery

Rachel Lasry, a former Torontonians and staff at the humanitarian relief organization Ve'ahavta, is currently working in Israel as the Save a Child's Heart spokesperson. She was part of an Israeli delegation that travelled to Amman, Jordan, to set up a clinic at the Red Crescent Hospital. Doctors from Save a Child's Heart (SACH), a non-profit humanitarian organization that treats children from all over the world with congenital heart problems, screened 38 Iraqi children

Two children, five-month-old Tara and 11-year-old Karwan, suffered from conditions that the doctors felt had to be treated urgently

On the spot, we started the process of trying to get all the clearances to make sure the children were able to cross" into Israel immediately," Lasry said

She said both sides worked well together to make sure that the children would get into Israel as quickly as possible

There was a lot of teamwork and incredible effort on everyone's part. It is a sign that we as Jews and Israelis are" coming together with Muslims and Arabs," Lasry said

When the doctors first saw Tara, they were concerned about the colour of her skin

She was quite blue, almost purple I would say, and that just showed how severe her situation was and the lack of" oxygen... in her blood," Lasry said, adding that Tara could have died at any moment

The 11-year-old boy, Karwan, was also critical. For him, walking 10 steps was strenuous

Both of them suffer from the same family of diseases, what you call a cyanotic heart disease," said Dr. Sion Hourii," director of the pediatric intensive care unit at Wolfson Medical Center in Holon, Israel, where SACH has an agreement that permits the organization to use all the facilities of the hospital, provided that they are able to raise the \$10,000 it costs to perform the surgery on each patient

Cyanotic heart disease is a congenital heart defect that results in low blood oxygen levels

With the boy, the artery going to the lung is obstructed," Hourii said, adding that Karwan wasn't able to walk more" than a few steps without having to squat, which would force blood into the lungs

Hourii decided that Karwan needed urgent care and arranged to have him come to Israel last Thursday

When they arrived last night, they were all exhausted, but Karwan's mom was just in tears, saying, 'Anshallah,"

.anshallah," which is like, 'Thank God.' She couldn't believe she was here, in a way," Lasry recalled

.As serious as Karwan's heart condition was, Tara's situation was even more critical

She was surviving by a connection [from the lungs] to the two main arteries, that only exists in utero," Dr. Hourii" .said

He added that the tiny connection to the lungs was becoming smaller and smaller and the level of oxygen in her .blood was extremely low

We just added a tube to bring more blood to the lungs. We decided she was too sick to have the final surgery at" ".this stage

Hourii said that now a decision has to be made whether Tara and her mother will travel back to Iraq for five or six months before the final surgery, or whether they will stay at a house, provided by SACH, 10 minutes from the .hospital, where patients, nurses and volunteers stay, until the final surgery

Although the SACH team is excited about providing these children with an opportunity for a full, normal life, .Lasry said that of the 38 children they met in Amman, there were nine or 10 children who couldn't be saved

It was really upsetting for everyone. The doctors were discouraged. There was this one father with his son who" was about eight or nine years old... He knew he was sick, he knew what was going on, and unfortunately, it was too late for his son, and it was really difficult to convey that to the father. We took the boy aside to try to keep him busy because his dad was really grieving. But he could sense that something was wrong, and that was really .difficult," Lasry said

On the other hand, 24 more children from that group will get treatment from Israeli doctors within the next nine .months

We do this because it needs to be done. It is a humanitarian cause and we have the means. These are our" neighbours. Half of the children we've treated have been from Arab countries... We are in the Middle East... and every effort to reach out to work together is really important," Lasry said

Whether this is going to make a difference in the big game, I don't know. One thing for sure is that in life, it is" important to know that you are doing your share. I think all the people involved have the feeling, and rightly so, .that we are doing our share of the deal," Hourii said

.Since it was established in 1995, SACH has treated more than 1,700 children from 28 countries

.For more information about the organization, visit www.saveachildsheart.com

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