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Getting to the heart of the matter

By Daniel Ben-Tal
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Whatever the political climate, the charity Save a Child's Heart saves the lives of Palestinian children. Now the Israeli government and the EU have stepped in to fund further vital heart surgeries for Palestinian and Iraqi children.



Some of the children being treated by Save a Child's heart, with the volunteer doctors and staff from Wolfson Hospital.

While the world's focus was out to sea, an Israeli-based charity was busy performing open-heart surgery on children from Gaza.

"The international media was talking about the flotilla, while Israeli hospitals were treating kids from Africa, Iraq and Gaza," says Simon Fisher, executive director of SACH (Save a Child's Heart), an Israeli-based international humanitarian project with a mission to save the lives of children from developing countries with cardiac ailments.

"That's the Israel I know - nothing like the one portrayed in the media. It deserves acknowledgement," Fisher tells ISRAEL21c.

"We hold a free cardiology clinic at the Edith Wolfson Medical Center in Holon every Tuesday for Palestinian children from the West Bank and Gaza Strip, regardless of the regional political atmosphere. The clinics took place even during the war in Gaza [18 months ago]. Even in the worst of times, our programs continue. We find that on both sides, regardless of Hamas, Fatah or any other organization, there is always cooperation."

"The day after the flotilla incident, the kids from Gaza turned up as usual. We treat an average of 10 each week, referred to us by 10 Palestinian physicians in the West Bank and Gaza."

This summer, SACH is launching two projects: The Israeli Ministry for Regional Cooperation has committed NIS 1 million (some \$260,000) to supporting life-saving heart surgery for 100 Iraqi, Palestinian and Jordanian children in the coming year. Meanwhile, the European Union has allocated Euro 400,000 to fund heart surgery for 150 children from the Palestinian Authority and provide in-depth postgraduate training in pediatric cardiac care for eight Palestinian physicians under the 'Heart of the Matter' project, which is part of the EU's "Partnership for Peace" Program. This is the third time the EU has co-sponsored 'Heart of the Matter' - a cooperation that began in 2005.

The two projects were launched on June 20 at the Wolfson Medical Center with a ceremony attended by Minister for Regional Cooperation Silvan Shalom and the EU's Ambassador to Israel, Andrew Standley.

"At a time when the world is debating Israel's actions in Gaza, our answer to the next flotilla is this project and saving children from Gaza," Shalom said during the ceremony. "We are not engaged in a conflict with the Palestinian people." Standley added that the project proves that Israel and the Palestinians can cooperate.

Most popular international charity

Meanwhile, SACH is very much in the running to win an EBay contest for most popular international charity. At the time of writing, the non-profit had surged into fourth place in the auction site's "most popular charity" contest. The winning charity on July 4 will receive \$15,000 - enough to save another child's life.

SACH is blind to a sick child's nationality, religion, color, gender or financial situation. Since its inception in 1995, the non-profit has been treating children from developing countries suffering from rheumatic and congenital heart disease. SACH has examined and evaluated more than 5,500 children, trained 50 physicians and nurses, and performed more than 150 life-saving surgeries overseas, alongside local personnel. From 48 in 1996, the number of cardiac surgeries performed by SACH has grown to over 200 in 2009.

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To date, SACH has treated over 2,400 children from 40 developing countries, including over 1,100 Palestinian children and over 100 Iraqi children who have undergone open-heart surgery. Some 40 percent of the children who underwent cardiac surgery are from Africa; 49% from the Palestinian Authority, Jordan & Iraq; 4% from Moldova, Russia and the former Soviet Union, and 7% from China, Sri Lanka and Vietnam. Last year, the Israeli embassy in China marked the 18th anniversary of diplomatic ties by saving 18 young Chinese lives.

"As we speak, we are treating 20 Palestinian and Iraqi children in Wolfson, and one Moroccan child," says Fisher. "The first Moroccan child was admitted to a program this month, and successfully underwent open-heart surgery. Each is here with an escort, usually a female family member who stays with a Christian organization called Shevet Achim [that helps non-Israeli children receive lifesaving medical care in Israel]."

"We also run a children's home in Azur [near Tel Aviv], where currently there are children from developing countries including Burkino Faso, Zanzibar, Tanzania, Romania and China. It's always a full house," says Fisher.

"Another facet is getting young people involved through the "Seeds of Peace" program. They attend summer camps organized through [the Seeds of Peace] offices in Tel Aviv and Ramallah. This way, we get young Israelis and Palestinians to volunteer to help families during their stay in Israel."

"What Israeli society stands for"

A lawyer by training, Liverpool-born Fisher emigrated to Israel in 1974 and served in the IDF as a paratrooper officer. "I did my articles for an Israeli law firm, then took time off to travel the world and see how the rest of the world views Israel," he says.

On his return in 1999, he sought a new challenge. "One bright morning I went for an interview in a small three-room apartment in Holon, then the headquarters of SACH. I found myself staying behind after the interview to help pack boxes of equipment for doctors going to Ethiopia," Fisher recalls.

"SACH combines the things I believe in - saving children's lives while doing incredible advocacy work for the State of Israel. I believe in saving lives ... and telling the world all about what Israeli society stands for," Fisher says.

"SACH's activities are based in Wolfson," he notes, "not Hadassah or another well-known medical center. Wolfson provides services to working Israelis. It doesn't enjoy the support that other hospitals enjoy. At the end of the day, Wolfson is promoting excellence and offers the best service possible. In the field of pediatric cardiac treatment, it has become the country's leading medical center. The program is led by Dr. Lior Sasson, head of the hospital's cardio-vascular department. He is the top in his field in the country," says Fisher.

The two pediatric doctors working regularly with the Palestinians are Drs. Akiva Tamir and Alona Raucher. They communicate in a combination of Hebrew, English and Arabic, and are helped by Dr. Fayeze Shakalia, a pediatric cardiologist from Gaza, has been working alongside Tamir, for over 10 years. "He has referred hundreds of patients to our clinic," says Fisher.

Two other Palestinian physicians have also spent substantial time at Wolfson. Dr. Rula Awwad, a Christian pediatric cardiologist from Bet Sahur [near Bethlehem in the West Bank], has been at the hospital for three years, and now regularly refers patients to Israeli hospitals. Dr. Omar Assali did in-depth training at Wolfson for a year. He is based in Nablus, and uses a portable echocardiography machine donated to him by Dutch donors of SACH.

Saving the life of his brother

For one of the Palestinians working at Wolfson hospital, SACH has also proved a lifesaver for a family member.

Dr. Wafik Othman has been training in anaesthesia at Wolfson for three years. He asked SACH to treat his nine-year-old brother, Hamed, who was still suffering cardiac problems after an unsuccessful operation. "They saved his life," Othman tells ISRAEL21c. "Previously he had no appetite - now we can't stop him from eating!"

Othman, 33, studied medicine in Poland before working as a general practitioner in Ramallah and Nablus, specializing in emergency care. "Now I work every day in Wolfson, and go home at weekends, to Bidiya in the West Bank. We live not far from Israel. We have many connections with the Jews - it's not new to us. People on both sides know that doctors are not politicians. We do all we can to help sick people - no matter who. A child's heart isn't inscribed with his gender, race or color."

Does he experience any social backlash at home?

"On the contrary - no one disturbs us," says Othman. "It's given me a lever. Because I work in Israel, I serve as a model to my family, friends, surroundings. I bring in my Palestinian patients' files, and take advice from Israeli doctors. Such activities very much help bring the peoples together."

When he began studying and working at Wolfson, together with other Palestinian doctors, Othman's Hebrew was limited. "Israeli doctors took us under their wing and gave us the self-confidence to work in the ward. I never expected a red-carpet welcome, and was pleasantly surprised. I think a lot of what I've learned here needs to be brought into action in the West Bank."

SACH has conducted two surveys that demonstrated the positive effect on how the two sides view each other. "This is a daily encounter. The common concern - that of the health of our children - helps to eradicate the mutual mistrust and forms a platform for future cooperation," says Fisher.

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