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Charity has its heart in the right place

John Stapleton | July 28, 2008

EIGHT years ago Simon Fisher was torn between two futures. His background as a corporate lawyer had groomed him for a high-flying role in the business world. But his heart sang a different tune.

One morning in September 2000, having returned to Israel after a stint of world travel, he went to a job interview in the plush offices of one of the country's leading law firms. In the afternoon he went for an interview in the rundown apartment at Holon, near Tel Aviv, which served as the offices of the charity Save A Child's Heart.

By the end of the interview he was sitting on the floor helping volunteers pack medical supplies into boxes.

Now the charity's chief executive, he spent yesterday organising a photographic exhibition in Sydney featuring some of the 2000 children who have had their lives saved as a result of the charity's work throughout the developing world.

Save A Child's Heart, founded by the visionary American surgeon Amram Cohen, promotes life-saving heart surgery for kids born with heart defects, both by bringing them to Israel and by working with local heart specialists in more than 30 countries.

More than half of the patients are Muslim, and the fact Jewish doctors are saving the lives of Islamic children, including hundreds of Palestinians, has been the subject of much controversy.

Some 70 gravely ill Iraqi children have undergone surgery in an Israeli government hospital, the Wolfson Medical Centre, while the families themselves are often forced to keep secret how their children were saved.

Organisers claim the saving of Iraqi and Palestinian children in a Jewish hospital is a classic example of what Save A Child's Heart is all about.

"Every Tuesday we have a clinic for Palestinian children brought from Gaza on the West Bank," Mr Fisher said.

"The more Israeli and Palestinian doctors work together, the better it is for the Palestinian health system. Save A Child's Heart is about saving the lives of children, but also about developing the medical capacity of poorer countries, and building connections, breaking down walls and stereotypes.

"Sometimes we can have Israeli, Iraqi, African and Palestinian parents all in the same waiting room. Through the suffering of their children they grow more tolerant and learn to know one another."

The charity is being sponsored by the Israeli Government to send copies of the photographic exhibition around the world. The portraits are of wide-eyed, scared and very sick children in the lead-up to the surgery. And then the results.

"One of the most amazing things is how speedy their recovery is. They are often up and about, laughing and happy, within two or three days."

While here, Mr Fisher hopes to show the photographs in a number of hospitals and establish a support group, Friends of Save A Child's Heart.

To offer assistance: www.saveachildsheart.org

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