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Developing an independent Palestinian cancer care capacity



Since the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, considerable effort has been invested by the Palestinians to advance the provision of health services and to create an independent health-care system. Nevertheless, Palestinian health services still struggle to establish the infrastructure and human resources required to meet its needs.

Cancer is the second-leading cause of death in the areas governed by the Palestinian Authority, with 14% mortality in 2016: a 6% increase from 2015.¹ In the past decade, the Palestinian Authority has relied on hospitals in Palestine to be the primary providers of health-care services. Contact with hospitals in Israel has allowed Palestinians to bridge gaps in quality health-care provision via the transfer of patients who require complex treatment to hospitals in Israel. Israel has been supportive of this approach by providing 100 000 travel permits to Palestinians each year. From 2011 to 2015, the number of patients treated in a Palestinian hospital in East Jerusalem decreased by 8%, while the number of those referred for treatment in hospitals in Israel almost doubled.²

Since July, 2018, this situation has changed, after the Palestinian Authority Ministry of Health suspended most of the funding for patients being treated in Israel. Aggravating the matter, in August, 2018, the US State Department announced its intention to redirect US\$25 million it had committed for hospitals in East Jerusalem to projects elsewhere.³ These policy changes affected the provision of health-care services in areas governed by the Palestinian Authority and increased the load on hospitals in East Jerusalem, which were already experiencing shortages in medications, equipment, and personnel. To achieve economic independence towards the goal of establishing a sovereign state, the Palestinians are now seeking alternative sources for the health-care resources that they import from Israel.

In the past decade, East Jerusalem's Augusta Victoria Hospital (AVH), which is owned and operated by the

Lutheran World Federation, has played a pivotal role in the process of establishing an independent Palestinian health-care system. The AVH is the Palestinian Authority's major cancer centre, serving over 4·8 million Palestinians. The number of patients with cancer treated at the AVH has tripled (from about 1800 to 5614) in the past 5 years, and includes all medical and radiation oncology treatments.

Despite tensions in the region, the AVH has benefited from an ongoing partnership programme established in 2011 with Israeli physicians from the Head and Neck Center at the Rambam Healthcare Campus, Haifa.⁴ This centre is the largest referral facility of its kind in Israel and operates clinics located across the country.⁵ The treatment protocols established by the Israeli–Palestinian teams have allowed patients with cancer to have a higher standard of care in their community and at a lower cost than in neighbouring countries, saving the lives of thousands of Palestinian patients.

A major challenge in implementing an independent health-care system is providing commensurate training, which is scarce, particularly in the areas of oncology, specifically paediatric haematology–oncology and cancer surgery. In a peace scenario, Israel is likely to be a valuable source of such training.





Ofir Golani/Rambam Healthcare Campus

However, the political torpor in the region has diminished the interest of government officials to promote joint initiatives. To expand capacity, in 2019, the AVH–Rambam team launched a new 5-year programme for training health-care providers, which focuses on AVH requirements. The programme’s three-tier system aims to train Palestinian staff in Israel, mentor medical teams at AVH, and refer complex cases to Rambam, where treatments will be administered jointly until full independence is achieved.

The training programme is focusing on fields that are of paramount importance to the Palestinians such as bone-marrow transplantation, hepatobiliary medicine, breast and head and neck surgery, palliative care, and nuclear medicine. This initiative benefits from the fact that the teams can commute easily from the West Bank to Israel, allowing them to treat patients from both nationalities together. Over 25 trainees and dozens of tutors have participated in the programme, which will continue serving Palestinian patients at increasing levels of expertise as the project matures.

Although delivery of health-care services to Palestinians via Israeli providers might be effective,

this system cannot be sustained in the long term. The Rambam–AVH initiative has proven itself to be an effective tool towards Palestinian independence in health care. This joint effort can be used not only to improve medical care for the population, but also as a force for increasing solidarity among individuals and to build bridges between nations. We believe the curriculum introduced by this voluntary partnership will shift the framework of cancer treatment in the areas governed by the Palestinian Authority and serve as a model for the development of health-care services in conflict regions around the world.

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