

EDITOR'S CHOICE: Peace in our time

The season of peace and goodwill is approaching. In this issue, Billy Boland shares his experiences of volunteering at Crisis Open Christmas. It's a scheme I took part in myself several years ago. The charity Crisis opens several centres from 23 to 30 December every year. These Christmas centres offer homeless and vulnerably housed people companionship at a time of year that can be particularly lonely for those without a home or family. Their healthcare service provides advice and assessment, and some limited interventions and treatment, supported by a pharmacy service. If you are inspired after reading Billy's article, you might

be interested to know Crisis is looking for doctors to volunteer at its centres this Christmas. Their website www.crisis.org.uk has full details.

As Billy Boland reflects, we go into medicine for many reasons, but many of us did so to make a difference. Patrick Stafer shares this view and on this page describes another volunteering scheme in which doctors register to fill gaps in clinical services during times of conflict. In his experience, doctors came together to bring not only healing, but also harmony. In the words of Mahatma Gandhi, "peace is its own reward."

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Medicine is a bridge to peace

Patrick Stafer believes doctors can convey harmony

"Nation will not lift sword against nation and they will no longer study warfare."

(Isaiah 2:4)

During a clinical attachment in Israel in the spring of 2007, I witnessed a conciliatory atmosphere and saw how health care brings people together.

In Israel during times of crisis, a large number of reservists are drawn into the army, leaving a lack of healthcare professionals on wards and in clinics. In an effort to safeguard clinical service provision during potential future conflicts, the Jewish Agency called on doctors around the world to register as volunteers to fill any gaps. To be eligible as a volunteer, doctors are required to complete two weeks as clinical attaché in an Israeli hospital.

Children in need

I did my attachment at Schneider Children's Medical Center of Israel (SCMCI; www.schneider.org.il/eng), about 20 minutes drive from Tel Aviv, with 250 paediatric beds. It acts as a tertiary and quaternary referral centre for the entire Middle East. SCMCI is attended by children from as far away as Kazakhstan for treatments such as cardiothoracic surgery and cochlear implants.

On my first day I attended an annual

cystic fibrosis (CF) family evening. Patients and family members talked about how CF affected their lives. A Jewish parent shared a prayer in which he asked God to give his family strength to cope with the illness and its high demands. Treatment adherence was achieved by integrating nebulised antibiotics and physiotherapy with the routine of regular prayer sessions. Next to him sat a parent from a nearby Palestinian village who answered "Amen" to his neighbour's prayer before going on to express his gratitude to the CF team for keeping his daughter under as close follow

up as possible under the circumstances. Travelling through road blocks was not easy. With the Palestinian Authority unable to pay for all her treatments, Schneider's CF team had secured funding from the Israeli government.

No discrimination

Although we are all taught not to discriminate against patients or colleagues, as laid down in the General Medical Council's *Good Medical Practice*,¹ seeing this happen in an emotionally torn environment is impressive. In the Israeli emergency room, perpetrators



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and victims of terror attacks receive identical treatment, with resources allocated according to clinical need. Palestinian terrorists receive special protection by Israeli policemen to shield them from public assault.

Despite all the pain and suffering I heard many heart warming stories. Unfortunately,

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they do not make headlines. Here are two examples:

- A 7 year old Palestinian girl from East Jerusalem received a kidney donated by the Jewish family of a 19 year old victim of a terrorist suicide bombing in Tel Aviv
- A 12 year old Palestinian boy from Jenin was accidentally shot dead by the Israeli Defence Forces. In the darkest hour of their despair his parents decided to donate his organs to help save lives of Israelis “as a sign of peace and brotherhood between

two nations.” The series of multiple organ transplants benefited a 12 year old Druze boy, a five year old Bedouin boy, a 4 year old Jewish girl, and a 7 month old Jewish infant.

Collaborating over chronic care

Over the past four years the Peres Centre’s “Saving Children Project” has brought 4000 Palestinian children to Israeli hospitals and financed their care. It has arranged and paid for 100 residencies for Palestinian physicians in medical centres in Israel, following President Shimon Peres’s credo that “more education means more progress and a better future for all.” The first international congress on chronic disorders in children was held in Jerusalem, April 2007, with participation of 300 Israeli and 100 Palestinian doctors. The main topic was high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder on both sides.

I enjoyed my attachment, not only for the rich clinical experience but also because it taught me how medicine can bring sanity

to an insane part of the world. It seems that great challenges can bring out the best in people. I am now entitled to help out as a volunteer doctor in the Israeli health service should the need arise; hopefully it never will.

My experiences in Israel fill me with pride in my profession and my culture. If only politicians had half as much common sense as healthcare professionals and indeed ordinary people, the fulfilment of Isaiah’s prophecy would be a lot closer.

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¹ General Medical Council. *Good medical practice*. London: GMC, 2006. www.gmc-uk.org/guidance/good_medical_practice/index.asp.

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“This hospital, dedicated to the inherent right of every child to live a healthy life in a peaceful world, will stand as a ‘bridge to peace,’ linking this nation to its many neighbors.”

Cornerstone Scroll, Schneider Children’s Medical Center of Israel, April 1988.

