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KBRM member with a remarkable story to tell

A new member of KBRM has written about her experiences as a nurse in Israel and the West Bank. Her on-the-scene account tells a remarkable story about a side of Israel that is seldom, if ever, presented in the NZ press. The article was submitted for publication in all leading NZ newspapers:

KBRM submitted this article to all major NZ newspapers. It was not published.

A KIWI'S EXPERIENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

by Dorothy Finlay

Dorothy Finlay lives in Tauranga and is a member of Kiwis for Balanced Reporting on the Mideast.

I have spent nearly 35 years of my life in the Middle East. As a Christian with close friends among Arabs and Jews, I am literate in Arabic and can communicate in Hebrew. I have nursed in the Christian Arab sector of the Old city, in St. John Eye Hospital in Jerusalem, and Nasir Eye Hospital in Gaza in 1999. I have also worked in Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem and taught in the Arab Bethlehem University. I recently returned from Jerusalem, where I was part of an expat team helping Arab children with congenital heart disease who receive life-saving surgery from Israeli paediatric cardiac surgeons.

I know how issues related to Israel are always inflammatory to those who have prejudice — both religious and political. I have even seen charges of Israel's 'oppression' of Arabs and 'apartheid'. I can say, on the basis of my own experience and that of others, that such charges have no basis in fact.

Following is an account of a typical day (January 20, 2009) during my most recent stay. What I saw, on this day — and all other days — was quite the opposite of 'oppression' and 'apartheid'.

Today is another busy day for the team from Shevet Achim, an NGO that coordinates care for children from Iraq, Gaza, and the West Bank who need urgent heart surgery in Israeli hospitals.

As I walk through the corridors of Wolfson Children's Hospital near

Abdullah Siam, relative of a senior Hamas leader, following life-saving heart surgery in an Israeli hospital



Tel Aviv, I see nearly as many Arab children with their mothers as Israelis. You could see they are all good friends, sharing concerns for their children. Hebrew, English and Arabic languages are interwoven in the hum everywhere as parents discuss their children with no thought of their origins.

Wahaj was first into the theatre for repair of a critical congenital heart condition. This bouncy two-year-old and his mother had travelled from northern Iraq to Jerusalem and had been waiting for a week for the 'big day'. Now it is history and soon he will be able to return home with a new heart and future.

Havan, a very small 11-month-old from Iraq, is scheduled today for heart catheterisation. This little boy, who nearly succumbed to pneumonia en route through Jordan, now has a perpetual smile.

Today six children from Gaza with serious heart problems are being transported from the Erez Israel/Gaza crossing to Israeli hospitals for assessments, examinations and surgery. Last week there were ten such children in one day. Palestinian doctors, who depend on Israeli hospitals to treat these children, referred them to Dr Tamir, head of the Israeli NGO 'Save a Child's Heart' (SACH). Israeli surgeons with SACH provide the high tech surgery at no charge to the children.

Last night I accompanied a little six year old boy, Hizam, with his father back to the Gaza border, twelve days following radical heart surgery. While at the border, as we were depositing him and his father, the alarm came over the intercom for us to leave quickly. There was a loud noise and in the sky we saw a rocket that had been launched in the direction of S'derot, an Israeli town 10 km from Erez. It fell short and landed in a field. It gave me a small sense of the fear and tension that is felt every time HAMAS fires at Israel, sometimes 10-20 times a day.

I asked Hizam's father about his attitude to coming to Israel from Gaza. He was so happy. 'Everyone is willing to help a sick child', he said.

Today there are also several Palestinian children from Hebron to be examined and treated by sensitive and loving Israeli nurses and doctors who provide skilled professional care, served with a generous dollop of kindness and compassion.

Abdullah Siam (see photo) is a close relative of a senior Hamas leader who was operated on earlier. He is now packed up waiting to return to Gaza following life-saving heart surgery. Yes, even as Hamas is launching rockets at Israel and as the war in Gaza is pounding away, this child received the same loving care as the other children.

The Headquarters of Shevet Achim is in central Jerusalem, surrounded by Arab and Orthodox Jewish families. Next door construction work goes on and overcrowded buses and taxis ply the narrow road, known as Prophet Street. The children and parents are transported to the hospitals in Tel Aviv by Shevet drivers and are always accompanied by their staff.

New Zealand has provided a number of volunteers over recent years, living in an historic stone building where the first-ever children's hospital was established in Jerusalem in the 1860's. The mothers, children and expatriate staff share the facilities like a big family.

Prayers and love are the special ingredients that characterise this unusual organisation. Shevet Achim in Hebrew means 'Brothers Together'. It demonstrates the common goals linking us with the Israeli staff, who also believe God wants to save these little lives and send them back to their families, healthy, with a future and a hope.

All in all, Save a Child's Heart has brought more than 1,700 children from 28 countries to Israel for life-saving heart surgery. More than half of the patients have been Palestinians, Jordanians and Iraqis. The families of these children understand full well the true situation in Israel. As the mother of an Iraqi child treated in 2007 said, 'Israel is a good country. It's a country that has mercy on other people.' Yet this mother would not give her last name for fear of retribution from Islamic militants who reject Israel's existence.