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We have always cherished this partnership.”

May 2022 – Jerusalem

In bringing the service and care levels back up to what they were before Covid-19 struck, what are the major challenges that the Eye Hospital face in trying to achieve that?:

“ Back in 2020, we faced a government that imposed a lockdown for 4 months which led to us having about 20% of our patients not being able to reach us. The change in government meant we were able to compensate for that, clear the backlog and last year we reached around 135,000 patients and completed 6,500 operations which was a new record for the Eye Hospital. We are the only Eye Hospital in the world (according to Moorfields) that has achieved this. The main challenge to improve now is a financial one. We are facing a massive problem in Gaza with regard to the number of patients waiting for surgery, we have around 450 waiting, so we have just increased our surgical ward and the surgical staff are working weekends for the next 3 months to clear the waiting list. This also requires resources for equipment, especially disposable surgical equipment.

You have made great progress in some very difficult areas with the Outreach programme in particular, especially in Gaza and the more remote parts of the West Bank and in opening up new clinics. Do you have plans to extend these further?

“ We have made some great progress, and we are planning to do more as the need is very great. We have seen around 10,000 patients with the Outreach in 2020 and 2021 in Jerusalem and the West Bank and about 8,000 in Gaza. Thanks to donor support, a second Outreach Team is planned, with a new van for 2023 when we can launch it into the West Bank.

Compared to Western Europe, how much higher is the rate of blindness here?

“ Unfortunately a Palestinian person is 10 times more likely to become blind or visually impaired than the average person in Western Europe. There are different reasons for that including poverty, access to health care, consanguinity, poor knowledge and understanding with the most common causes being cataracts and diabetes which can lead to diabetic retinopathy.

Our fundraising efforts within Knights Templar have often relied on many committed individuals 'doing their bit', and we are keen to encourage this. What impact and difference can these donations make?

“ If I may start by mentioning that the hospital, the patients and the staff are most grateful for the support we have enjoyed with the partnership between the St. John Eye Hospital of Jerusalem and the Knights Templar. We are talking about more than 100 years of support that we have received from the Knights Templar, and I remember the first cheque I saw was from around 107 years ago for £3,000. The support we receive from the individuals in the Knights Templar helps us to clear the shopping list. In this we have things like sheets for the baby cots, nurse's uniforms, blankets, uniforms for the gardeners, even stools for the patients to sit on and chairs in the waiting rooms. These donations help us to focus our budget. We cannot operate the hospital without these items so we very much welcome this kind of individual support.

And with regard to the KOVB:

“ We are aware of Eminent Knight Angus Rhodes and the Knights of the Vision Beautiful, and I think this is one of the best initiatives that enhances the connection between the members of the Knights Templar and the hospital, and we very much appreciate it.



Have you seen a larger take-up of Palestinian recruits in your staff?

“ If I may go back 30 years from when I first joined this hospital, all our senior nursing, medical and administrative staff were expatriot, some from the Navy, the Army, and with short assignments, 3 to 6 months. So, we started recruiting and training locally. We opened a School of Nursing, we now have a Medical School of Ophthalmology, and I am very pleased to say that we are self-sufficient, and all our staff are home grown, very well-trained Palestinians, doctors, nurses as well as administrative staff and recently the Chief Executives post! This has really helped the integration of the Hospital with the community as we are relying on staff that are living and working in the same community as the patients.

Has this change affected your mission?

“ I can speak with confidence that since the establishment of this hospital, we are celebrating 140 years this year, the mission of the hospital remains unchanged. We provide excellent eye care to everybody who needs it, regardless of their race, religion, social class or their ability to pay. We look after Palestinians, Israelis, immigrants, Muslims, Christians and Jews. Anybody who needs us and knocks on our doors, he or she receives full care. If you look at our statistics most of our patients are Palestinian, but this is because they need us more and the Jewish community has a very well-established health care system.



Movement restrictions out of Gaza and between the old city and the outskirts of Jerusalem can sometimes create difficulties for many. What sort of care are you able to provide in the Muristan Clinic within the city walls and does access restrictions provide problems for your patients?

“ *The Order of St. John started more than a thousand years ago at the area of the Muristan. This is why we established a Primary Eye Care Clinic there having a connection with the past. It now provides emergency, primary eye care for people who live in the Old City of Jerusalem. That has helped us deal with some huge problems, though it doesn't provide comprehensive care. It provides screening, deals with foreign bodies, emergencies and then they can refer to the main hospital.*

The main access issue we have is with Gaza. Around 45% of those who seek eye care are either denied or have their processing delayed when they come to the checkpoint. We therefore want to strengthen our presence there from it being a day hospital and I can see that in a few years time, Gaza will be almost self-sufficient, and be a stand-alone hospital that does not need to refer patients to Jerusalem.

It is important for us in Knights Templar to ensure we have Current, Correct and Consistent information for our Knights, so we are looking to create a London support function. How do you think that works from your point of view and is there anything you can do to help us achieve that aim?

“ *I think that our own communication and marketing strategy is good but does not do enough. Therefore, in the last few weeks we have discussed this with the board and have come up with a change of strategy. We will have a person here in Jerusalem to provide a regular flow of information to our major donors and supporters including yourselves in London and the Knights Templar. This should include case studies, reports and information on what is going on here. These will be coming to you as we look to get this underway.*

