

## An introduction...



This is the basis for a talk that covers the work of the Eye Hospital, adds a little about the context relating to the situation in Palestine, a few points of history as well as a personal experience of the care that they give. It has many of the examples mentioned in the Presenting Pointers, so this may be helpful for you to combine with your own thoughts and ideas.

**This version contains more facts than were used in the actual talk, but these have been included so that you may choose ones that suit your message.** The facts, where mentioned, are correct at Sept 2023. The talk was given to an external audience. It has been expanded from note cards.

---

“ In February 2020, a young, Palestinian girl, [Yxxxx], who was about 6 years of age, walked into the St. John Eye Hospital in Jerusalem with her grandfather. She was blind.

Her grandfather had been advised by their family not to go. They thought there was nothing that could be done – she had been blind for most of her life and, well, they were poor, they had no money and were sure that nobody considered them important enough to be helped. But his granddaughter was everything to him and if there was a chance she could be helped, then he would take it.

They walked for 5 days, through checkpoints, hassled by Israeli soldiers, but they got to the hospital. They waited patiently and as the hospital won't close for the day until everyone who has turned up has been seen, she was later admitted, diagnosed with glaucoma and then treated. The treatment was successful and when her first eye patch was removed, she cried quite a lot, after all, along with everything else that was new, she had never seen her grandfather before.

I know this story is true, because it was the grandfather who told me.

I was on the Knights Templar Pilgrimage to the Holy Land at the time and it was my first trip to the Eye Hospital. We were all being treated a little like VIPs and were having a wonderful tour of the hospital. I was standing next to Yxxxx's bed and her grandfather took my hand very, very firmly and said "Shukran, Shukran" ("Thank you, thank you", for how we had helped his granddaughter). The nurse kindly acted as an interpreter! He told me their story whilst Yxxxx was jumping on the bed. She seemed very happy, after all the patch on her other eye was due off soon and her grandfather and the nurse had promised to take her to see some flowers in the hospital garden, another first for her.

I tried to explain that it was the doctors, nurses and surgeons that were to be thanked, not us. I said that we were from England and that we were there because, as Knights Templar, we help to raise money to support the hospital, as it is our **charity**. He looked around the bay which had a few other children in, all at different stages of diagnosis and treatment. He grabbed my hand again, paused and said "so what you do makes **all** of this possible." I had no answer to that.

==/=== **Approx. 3 mins**

**For those of you who know me, you know I am passionate about the St. John Eye Hospital and its work and every time I visit, my admiration increases.**

**For those of you who do not know me, my name is Vernon King, I am the Provincial Vice-Chancellor of London and, **if you will indulge me for just a few minutes, I will tell you how the effort that you make actually saves sight and changes lives!****

Yxxxx was fortunate to have a grandfather that took that chance. Without that, she would have remained blind, she would not have been able to go to school or get an education, no-one would have married her, and she would have remained a burden on her family and would not be able to help others. Instead, she can now get an education, perhaps get a job and earn money, probably get married and then become of benefit to her family rather than a burden. Thankfully, this will change **many** lives.

Her story isn't uncommon and it is tough for anyone, especially someone like Yxxxx to beat the odds.

**1/3 of Palestinians live below the poverty line** on less than **\$3 per day** and as **50% are unemployed**, many have problems simply accessing enough food to live on. This has a knock-on to their health. **20% have diabetes** and so are prone to **Diabetic Retinopathy** which ultimately leads to blindness. On average there are **10x the levels of blindness** in Palestine than you get in Western Europe. With the gender inequality that exists, disproportionately women and children are affected, **70% of the blind people in the Palestinian Territories are women.**

**Let's keep putting things into perspective and let me give you a sense of scale.**

It can be difficult to access good quality eye care throughout the Holy Land. The situation in the Middle East is tense and that is a tragedy. Violence is close to the surface, and this gives rise to **fear**. The fear creates tension between communities and this makes **travel very restricted**, Yxxxx had to walk. Most patients need to apply for a permit, and **25% of these ARE REFUSED**, If they are granted, the chances are, even if you are a patient, **you have to travel alone!**

Lockdowns are frequent, so you can sometimes get to the Hospital, but you may not be able to get out. This has created 4 main enclaves:

- Gaza in the South West
- Hebron in the South part of the West Bank
- Around Jerusalem – Ramallah, itself
- Nablus

==/=== **Approx. 6 mins**

The St John Eye Hospital Group has responded to this by going out to these enclaves rather than waiting for the people to come to a single, central Hospital. They have built a hospital in **Gaza** that last year (2022) treated **39,000 patients** and performed **2,900 operations**. **They have just 45 staff!** 36 of these are medical – doctors, nurses and surgeons. Gaza has a population of **2.2 million** of which **1.3 million are refugees**.

In **Hebron**, they treated **14,000 patients** and performed **550 major operations**.

In clinics, like **Nablus**, **Anabta** and even **Muristan** in the Old City of Jerusalem they treated and screened **17,000 patients**. The Mobile Outreach programme reached 200 villages which, along with the new **Kufor Aqab Outreach Clinic**, they managed to reach a further **13,000 people**.

All that is in addition to the main hospital in **Jerusalem**, which is a large, modern facility that includes outpatient departments, specialist retinal, corneal, glaucoma, orthoptic and paediatric units, has a nursing school, operating theatres and 24-hour emergency services. It is the first Palestinian hospital to receive the JCI accreditation and has done so repeatedly since 2013. It alone treated **54,600 patients** and performed **3,300 major operations**. It has 111 medical, allied health professionals and nurses amongst a total staff of 180.

**Together, out of their 6 sites and Outreach, last year they treated over 142,000 patients and performed just under 7,000 operations.**

All these hospitals and clinics are open to **everyone**, but it is Palestinians like Yxxxx that knock on its doors most frequently. It will look after **Palestinians, Israelis, Immigrants, Muslims, Christians and Jews equally**. However, the Jewish community already has a well-established health care system.

==/= Approx. 9 minutes

The Mission Statement for the Eye Hospital hasn't changed since its inception, **140 years ago in 1882**.

---

**The St. John Eye Hospital Group is the only charitable provider of expert eye care in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, treating patients regardless of ethnicity, religion or ability to pay.**

---

The hospital has received over **100 years of continuous support** from the Knights Templar with donations made every year. The largest donor is the **Most Venerable Order of St. John of Jerusalem**.

It all started much earlier than that though, about 1,000 years ago. A hospital was established at the site of the current **Muristan Clinic in the Old City of Jerusalem** which was staffed by Benedictines and Knights Hospitallers, around 1023 according to most historical sources.

Right from the start **VIRTUE** was key - Integrity, honesty, generosity and courage.

Nowadays I think you can add, 'family' to that list. It has become like a family for the staff. Their dedication is **immense**, and there are many families, over many generations, who all work at the hospital. When you get to talk to the staff you get to understand their dedication.

They are very proud of the service and care they give to all their patients and we in London Support are very proud of the rapport we have built up with the staff, including those in clinical, medical and surgical teams, catering, communications, facilities, finance, HR, security and theatres and the nurses who run the clinics. We have seen first-hand, in the wards, clinics, the offices and in the operating theatres, just how the Eye Hospital staff feel like a true family.

In turn, our lives have become enriched by their stories and humbled by their dedication.

If you get to visit Jerusalem, I recommend spending a little time at the **Muristan Clinic**, in the Peace Garden at the heart of which is the **Tree of Hope**, a life-size bronze olive tree with a canopy, not of leaves but of 150 swirling swifts.

It stands in the courtyard of the Clinic, near to the Holy Sepulchre. The olive tree is **central to the lives of all peoples in the Holy Land** and is often used as a **symbol of peace**. If you visit between the end of March and early June, you can witness the migration of the swift. Some swifts nest and breed in the walls of the Old City and some also in the eaves of the Hospital. There are flights of bronze swifts, in groupings of three that tell of the three faiths and of the **hope of unity**, positioned around Muristan, and throughout the hospitals and clinics within the Group.

The Knights Templar recently had a 20 for 2020 Appeal selling these small swift lapel pins and raised over £80,000 for the Eye Hospital. **Without your help, either individually, or as part of a campaign, the St. John Eye Hospital Group would not be able to achieve the results it has.**

In 2022, **52% of the income it received was from donations like this**. It is all put to good use. It is all needed whether it is for new highly specialised technical medical equipment, blankets for cots, uniforms for the nurses or chairs for the waiting rooms.

It all helps towards patient care and it all makes a difference.

==/= Approx. 12 minutes

To give you an idea of the impact that your effort makes, may I ask anybody who has had an eye condition, one where they would have gone blind without treatment, e.g. **glaucoma, cataracts, retinoblastoma etc.** to please identify themselves.

*(This produced 3 people who kindly walked to one side of the room from an audience of 56, it gives an example of the situation in Western Europe.)*

May I now ask, each of the three of you, to please identify 9 other people to join you.

*(This resulted in 30 people now on the 'affected' side.)*

As we said earlier, blindness is **10 times more likely in Palestine than in Western Europe.**

**Regardless of your political views, it is very difficult to resolve any conflict, when many of the population can't see!**

But, if you want to understand the impact that the care from the Eye Hospital can make, would the original 3 people, please keep hold of **only one person each**, and the rest of you please kindly return to your seats.

**That's the difference that the Eye Hospital can make when it can provide treatment and care. That's the difference you make!**

**80% of these conditions are curable with treatment, they just can't get round to everyone!**

Thank you for your participation, and your kind attention, and on behalf of those at the Eye Hospital, staff and patients alike, thank you for your efforts and your continued support.

==/= Approx. 15 minutes