

The St John Ophthalmic Outpatient clinic and Cataract Day Case surgical Centre, Gaza

The Gaza Strip is one of the most densely populated but isolated areas in the world. Access in and out of it is extremely difficult, and patients in need of specialist eye care have sought treatment at the St John Eye Clinic in Gaza city. A satellite centre of the St John Eye Hospital in Jerusalem, it provides primary and secondary eye care. Ideally patients with severe eye disease are referred to the base hospital in Jerusalem but in recent years this has largely been impossible because of the restrictions of access in and out of Gaza. This means that babies with congenital eye disease, people with diabetes in need of highly specialised surgery, or patients needing sight-saving corneal grafts must be monitored and treated by the staff of the St John Eye Clinic, waiting for an opportunity for them to pass on to Jerusalem. Sometimes access to Jerusalem is impossible and the only alternative is to send patients in need of urgent treatment to Egypt, via the Rafah border of Gaza.

The St John Ophthalmic Outpatient clinic and Cataract Day Case surgical Centre was opened in 1992 in response to the increasing need for effective eye care in the Gaza Strip at a time when there was no other cataract surgery available for a population of one million. Many children in Gaza suffer from congenital eye disease that requires early detection and treatment, which was not available. The day the clinic was officially opened there was a strict curfew in effect in the area and the staff had to dodge military patrols in order to reach the clinic.

The nursing staff are Hanan Zaálan, Fouad Najjar, Ghazi El Baba, Mohamed Barakat, and Abdallah El Baba.

The majority of the residents of Gaza are refugees who lost their homes in 1948 or in 1967. Most live in one or other of the refugee camps in the Gaza Strip. All the nurses in the St John Clinic live in refugee camps.

The lifestyle for these nurses has been marked by the military and political situation. They have risked life and limb traveling to and from the Clinic, despite the fact that most of them live a short distance from it. Unpredictable attacks with missiles have happened close to the homes of all of the nursing staff. Sudden closure of roads has trebled the distance from home to the Clinic and several times the only access to Gaza city from the camps was to walk up to six km along the beach.

Close liaison with the base hospital has, for long periods, been only by telephone or e-mail. The staff has dealt with shortage of supplies usually obtained from Jerusalem in a unique manner, utilising any contact lucky enough to be able to get in or out of Gaza. Fortunately access to Gaza has eased in recent weeks, and the Orthoptist from the hospital is able to visit twice a month. The nurses screen and monitor hundreds of children suffering from squint who, if left untreated, will suffer amblyopia and loss of effective use of the affected eyes.

Hanan Zaálan is the only woman member of the staff, holding a BSc in Nursing. Her home was originally in the Beach refugee camp but after marriage she moved close to the Israeli Settlement of Nezarim. The direct road into the city and to the clinic was closed five years ago and her journey was often punctuated with crossfire. Frequently she was unable to leave her home, or could not return to it after a day's work in the clinic.

Fouad Najjar is the nursing coordinator and has been in charge of the nursing staff and developing the nursing care of patients since the clinic opened. He holds a BSc in Nursing and MA in Nursing Management. As the political situation continued to deteriorate, thousands of Palestinians lost their jobs, and the economic situation of many of the patients became dire and many could not afford to pay for their treatments. Fouad looked for ways and means to help them and their families.

Ghazi El Baba is an Ophthalmic Practical Nurse living in the Bureij refugee camp. Many homes were demolished in order to make the roads wider for passing army convoys. The closure of the roads also lengthened his journey to the clinic considerably and he was no longer able to drive his car. Several missile strikes have been close to his home.

Mohamed Barakat is a Licensed Practical Nurse who experienced a very difficult time living in the Rafah refugee camp. His home was severely damaged in 2003. The road to Rafah was closed many times and for long periods. Most recently the road was opened only sporadically in the night and Mohamed slept in his car at the checkpoint, waiting for it to open in order to get to work.

Abdallah El Baba is a Registered General Nurse, also living in Bureij refugee camp. He was for over 20 years a senior nurse at the St John Eye Hospital in Jerusalem. In 2001 travel between Jerusalem and Gaza became increasingly difficult, and finally impossible, forcing him to give up his job. He has recently taken the post of Recovery Nurse in the clinic after the surgical unit was extended to include surgery under general anaesthesia.

These nurses have displayed loyalty and perseverance in the interest of providing an invaluable service to a population suffering in a siege situation which, until recent times, only deteriorated. They have, with the two ophthalmologists who serve the clinic, continued to function totally independently when all access to the base hospital in Jerusalem was cut for years at a time. Their team spirit and innovative approach to work under very difficult circumstances is admired in Gaza, by their colleagues in the base hospital in Jerusalem, and by all who have heard about them.