

Augusta Victoria Hospital

This should be a simple story. But it is about Palestinians and Israelis, so it is complex.

We start at The Mount of Olives: the site of many important Biblical events. At the foot of the mountain is the Garden of Gethsemane where, according to tradition, Jesus stayed when in Jerusalem.

At the top of the mountain is the Augusta Victoria Hospital, the second-largest hospital in East Jerusalem. Seventy percent of its clients are Palestinian refugees. The hospital is largely financed by the Lutheran World Federation and by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency.

The hospital has many needs: Patients who live a short distance from the hospital normally have to spend hours in transit because of the wall, restricted roadways and checkpoints that Israel has set up in the West Bank. Patients who require daily treatments often stay at the hospital on in-patient status. The hospital lacks the funding to buy the latest medical equipment. There is a need for better pathology and intensive care departments and a lack of radiated and filtered blood for the patients. Most of its clients are not covered by Israeli health insurance, so the Hospital is dependent on charity. The decision by international donors to suspend funding for the Palestinian Authority (PA) following the election of Hamas to the leadership of the Palestinian Legislative Council has begun to have devastating effects on the Palestinian health care system. There is a possibility the Israeli government will remove the hospital's tax-exempt status. I could talk at length about any one of those concerns, but there isn't enough time. So I'm going to share only one story.

A few years ago the hospital started to concentrate on specialized medical services. One of those is cancer. The hospital has a Chemotherapy Unit, offers surgical oncology and pediatric hematology-oncology. Augusta Victoria Hospital is the first and only hospital to provide radiation therapy for cancer patients in the Palestinian Territories. About 70 percent of children diagnosed with cancer can be cured, and there are about 150 Palestinian children diagnosed with cancer every year from the West Bank alone. Given the \$50,000 to \$100,000 cost of treatment in Israel, most of those children won't be treated or will be misdiagnosed, and then it's too late. Hadassah University Hospital in Jerusalem, which provides Palestinian children a discount could not cover all of the costs or handle the whole caseload. Opening a pediatric oncology center in Palestine was the best answer.

The pediatric oncology unit, which opened in 2005, is a project of The Augusta Victoria hospital, the Israeli Peres Center for Peace, a variety of Italian foundations, and the Hadassah University Hospital. The project is an outgrowth of a complicated nexus of aid, training and political nuance provided by the Italians, the Israelis and the Palestinians themselves. Dr. Michael Weintraub, an Israeli, is the director of the hospital's Pediatric Hematology-Oncology unit. Dr. Usi Saifi, a Palestinian is the oncologist.

In some ways this is also a simple story - or a simpler one - of two doctors, Weintraub and Saifi, one Israeli and one Palestinian, who worked closely together to save the lives of children who would otherwise die. Weintraub and Saifi have a strong relationship of mutual admiration and care. And there is love here, too.

So that is the story. Simple, yet complex. But most importantly, it's an example of cooperation between Israelis and Palestinians. And it is on the Mount of Olives. If Jesus had favorite places during his life, the Mount of Olives was certainly one of them. He spent much time there. I suspect Jesus would be pleased with the respect for dignity and rights of all human beings there. And the love.