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Editor: KIPPA MATTHEWS
CHURCH
Tel: 020 7716 1000
Fax: 020 7716 1010
Subscriptions: 01803 0845 017 6945
Advertising: 020 7716 1089
London EC1R 7DT
108-114 Golden Lane
Inverca House
3rd floor
news

tidings of comfort and joy

the nativity as an image of the Church, safe births in Kenya, Santa strategies, return of the biblical epic, Anglicans and Mary, Christmas truce

PLUS:
first woman
bishop for
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wallplanner

The pilgrim healers of Palestine

St John Eye Hospital is an ancient institution providing up-to-date health care for Palestinians in East Jerusalem and Gaza. *Jemima Thackray* tells the story

PHOTOS ST JOHN EYE HOSPITAL



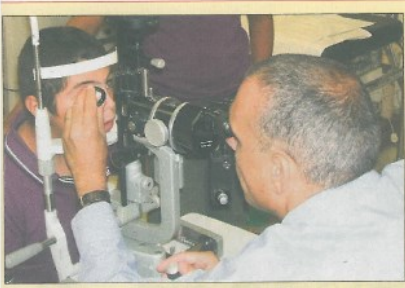
serious conditions back to the hospital." Not only does this outreach initiative enable the hospital to reach many children with congenital eye problems, who are often marginalised in society: many women are now also using the service.

"It is still the case, especially in remote villages, that, for cultural reasons, women are not allowed to travel on their own or without permission from their husbands," Mr Ma'ali says.

"But, through our outreach programme, we are also starting to bring about much more equity in this area of health care."

THE investment in these outreach vans has also made it possible for the hospital to pioneer a new diabetes screening programme, the first of its kind in Palestine. It is estimated that almost 20 per cent of Palestinians are diabetic — three times more than in the West — and the condition leads to retinal damage, which is the third largest cause of blindness in the region.

Mr Dahdal also oversees this initiative. "We hope to screen approximately 40,000 people by the end of the three-year programme, as well as providing treatment and giving talks and distributing information leaflets. The educational element is important, as much of the



Impossible made possible

GEORGE and his family live in Bethlehem. Four of his five children have had compromised vision since they were small; all of them were diagnosed by the hospital's outreach team when it journeyed to their community. His 13-year-old son, David (above), was found to have retinitis pigmentosa, an inherited disorder characterised by progressive peripheral vision-loss (leading in the end to blindness) and difficulty seeing at night. His brother Anton, who is 14, has high myopia and astigmatism, and his two sisters Sara and Maya also have astigmatism.

Although George works hard, his income barely meets the family's basic needs; so the economic burden of having four children requiring eye care has been carried by the hospital. "Without the outreach eye services, it would have been impossible for us to obtain the help our children needed, because this kind of medicine is too expensive for us," their mother, Dina, says. Aton and his two sisters were referred to the hospital in Hebron, where they received free glasses for their astigmatism, and their brother David has regular treatment for his retinitis pigmentosa, which includes vitamin supplements, and retinal consultations every six months.

'The number of people we can treat each week depends on the stability of the region'

is because of a lack of awareness." For the patients who do manage to travel to seek treatment, the St John of Jerusalem Eye Hospital Group has also made every effort to make its journeying as straightforward as possible.

First, rather than invest only in the expansion of the main hospital in East Jerusalem, the group has made it a strategic priority to set up a second hospital in Hebron, as well as two satellite clinics in Gaza and Anabta, enabling maximum access in a region that is notoriously hard to move about in.

In fact, a current project is the construction of a permanent day-care centre in the Gaza Strip, in response to the growing need of a population of 1.5 million, 1.2 million of whom are refugees — a population that faces ever decreasing mobility.

The group's commitment to access for all has been enough motivation to overcome the frustration at the many challenges. "We have had a very complicated mechanism with the Israelis with restricted access to materials," Mr Dahdal says. "We have to buy them from Israel rather than Egypt or anywhere else that may be deemed as aiding terrorism."

"But, having agreed to this, it then took us an entire year to get a permit to enable the materials to be



Independence returned

HABSA (above) is a 60-year-old housewife from Hebron. Like many older Palestinian women, she works hard to manage her household and look after her children and grandchildren, rarely travelling further than her local neighbourhood. For a while, she had been noticing that her vision was becoming blurry: "I couldn't carry out my daily activities. And I could hardly identify my grandchildren, except by touching them

or hearing them talk," she said. So, when the hospital's diabetes-screening programme came to her community, the staff were able to diagnose Habsa's diabetes, and also address the damage to her eyes (known as diabetic retinopathy), and stop the onset of preventable sight-loss. The same screening also showed that Habsa had a cataract. Surgery was quickly scheduled at the hospital in Hebron, and Habsa experienced rapid improvement to her sight, which has allowed her to return to normal life. "Now, I'm independent again. My children are back to work, as I can look after their children."

THE St John of Jerusalem Eye Hospital Group is the only charitable provider of eye care in Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem. It treats about 115,000 patients a year, and provides hospital accommodation for those who need it. It seeks to provide care for all, without discrimination.

"There are private doctors around," the hospital's Director of Nursing, Ahmad Ma'ali, says, "but you have to pay, and they are expensive: so, for the poor, it's here or nowhere."

Ophthalmology may seem like a specialised, relatively small area of medicine from a Western perspective, but the demand for eye care in the occupied Palestinian territories is staggering — the rate of blindness is ten times higher than in Europe.

"The reasons for such a high level of eye disease are varied and complex, but usually poverty-related," Mr Ma'ali says. "Poor nutrition, for example, leads to weaker immune systems. Then there is the factor of more intermarriage within families, which causes hereditary diseases like cataracts and glaucoma. We estimate that one child in every household in Palestine will have a form of congenital eye disease."

Not only is this devastating for the lives of individuals: it also has wider consequences for Palestinian society. A huge proportion of the population are children (almost a third are under ten years old); so the rate of eye disease in the young could lead to an entire generation who are unable to contribute to society because, owing to the stigma associated with blindness, they have been hidden at home, without receiving education or the confidence to lead independent lives.

THE hospital sees it, therefore, as a vital part of its work. One of the most important services is the outreach team, whereby doctors and nurses travel to remote villages and Bedouin camps to offer testing and treatment.

"This function is overseen by the Head of Development, David Dahdal, who describes the carefully planned logistics of the service: "Each of our vans has to carry a team of healthcare professionals, plus all the screening machines, plus supplies of medicine. They also need to be able to bring patients with the most



Looking ahead: top: a boy is examined; above, left: the head of development, David Dahdal; above, the Director of Nursing, Ahmad Ma'ali. In a teaching session; left: the hospital in east Jerusalem



therefore cannot gain access to health care, because of the remoteness of their village, or the poverty that renders them unable to afford the journey, or the restriction of movement caused by the myriad of Israeli checkpoints in the region.

It could be said that the staff at the hospital have become the pilgrims. One of the most important services is the outreach team, whereby doctors and nurses travel to remote villages and Bedouin camps to offer testing and treatment.

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'Doctors and nurses travel to remote villages and Bedouin camps'



Close inspection: left: a small boy visits a clinic; below, left: an elderly man receives a check-up; below: a schoolgirl examines a chart

