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Israeli telemedicine changes lives of Palestinian women in West Bank

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Sheba medical: Palestinian medics learning to use telemedicine at the Sheba Medical Center in Tel Aviv, Israel.

Benefits of Israeli medical expertise 'could promote coexistence'

The West Bank has one of the highest fertility rates in the region for adolescent girls aged 15 to 18 with 48 births per 1,000 girls. Yet some 145,000 women do not receive adequate health care, according to the World Healthcare Organization (WHO).

To address this major challenge, Israel's [Sheba Medical Center in Ramat Gan](#) announced the launch of a new program in collaboration with the Project Rozana NGO, aimed at enabling Palestinian women to access healthcare through telemedicine and other advanced technologies.

As part of the pilot project set up last April, 12 female [Palestinian medical staff](#) from two hospitals in Hebron received training in Sheba, learning how to use devices that will then be distributed to patients in remote areas of the West Bank, facilitating following up at home on in-person medical treatment.

About a hundred Palestinian patients living in three communities located about 12 miles around Hebron, including the Bedouin community, have already benefited from the program.

"Our goal is to provide women with the care they need, wherever they are," said Dr. Avi Tsur, director of the Center for Women's Health Innovation at Sheba. "Telemedicine allows us to bridge geographic, political and cultural gaps to achieve optimal outcomes."

Sheba, ranked by *Newsweek* among the 10 best hospitals in the world for the past four years, recently opened Israel's first virtual hospital, Sheba Beyond. Also run by Tsur, Sheba Beyond pioneered maternal-fetal telemedicine, achieving a breakthrough in remote fetal assessment for pregnant women in Israel.

Thanks to state-of-the-art devices connected to an application that gathers the medical data of each patient, women can receive a diagnosis via an online consultation. On a common screen accessible from their phone or computer, they are followed by both female doctors from Hebron hospitals and by the Sheba team, who have access to their complete medical files.

"A medical team based in Hebron can also welcome women in the event of a problem that cannot be managed remotely, possibly on the orders of Israeli doctors," Ronit Zimmer, Executive Director of the international NGO, Project Rozana, told i24NEWS.

Among the state-of-the-art devices on offer is the "HeraBEAT" machine which, positioned on the mother's belly, measures the heart rate of the fetus, simultaneously uploading the results to the application.

Israeli medical knowledge exported to the West Bank

Shortly before the start of the pandemic, Project Rozana put forward a project plan based on alarming data provided by the WHO, in particular on

the lack of specialists in certain regions of the West Bank. The pandemic only rendered such a program all the more urgent.

"Being stuck at home for long months was completely in line with the approach that we were bringing to light. Here it is a question of providing physical but also mental and emotional help to contribute to the wellbeing of women," Zimmer said.

"In these villages, women have a lot of children and the risk of death at birth is high. There are also cases of domestic violence, diabetes and babies with congenital pathologies linked to the fact that they often marry between first cousins," she added.

"Some have never seen a dentist at the age of 40 and know their bodies very little, because priority has never been given to raising women's awareness of medical issues," she noted.

Furthermore, Ronit revealed that today, breast cancer is the leading cause of death among Palestinian women. "In 2022, women should no longer die from this cancer, because if caught in time, it can be treated very effectively."

The limitations of the Palestinian health system for women

Access to healthcare and more particularly to sexual and reproductive care is restricted for women. For cultural and religious reasons, they cannot go to medical centers without being accompanied by a man, nor can they be examined by a male doctor, and for the most part they do not have the means of leaving their many children home alone, complicating their care.

"When we realized this, we understood the urgent need for telemedicine among these patients and the incredible breakthrough it would bring them. We also realized that the initiative had to come from within and that we therefore need to focus on training Palestinian women so that patients feel confident - this is essential," Zimmer said.

A step towards peace

This kind of initiative that builds bridges between communities, promotes knowledge sharing and cooperation in the medical field can expand to other areas and ultimately act as a model of peaceful coexistence on a larger scale.

"Using telemedicine is wonderful: it treats people, and being in good health makes them more optimistic and much more open," said Zimmer. "I think

there is also a great will on both sides to work together and that is very encouraging for the future.”

Within a few years, Zimmer hopes to expand the project to women in the Gaza Strip, saying trust must first be established between the teams for it to be completed. A glimmer of hope, which could, despite the recurring cycles of violence between Israel and the Gaza Strip, breathe new life into the long-running conflict.