

# TRUMP'S JERUSALEM HOSPITAL CUTS TO HURT INNOCENTS

*They undermine a unique Australian peace-building initiative*

RON FINKEL

The announcement that the Trump administration will pull \$US25 million (\$35m) earmarked for the East Jerusalem Hospital Network is surprising, shortsighted and destined to do significant harm to the health of many needy Palestinian patients as well as to the six allied hospitals.

It also will put pressure on Israel's health system, which has a symbiotic relationship with its Palestinian counterpart in East Jerusalem.

In his pursuit to bring the Palestinians to the negotiating table, US President Donald Trump has thrown the baby out with the bathwater. It would be hard to imagine any Israeli involved in the health sector endorsing this decision.

The six hospitals, including the venerable Augusta Victoria Hospital and the St John of Jerusalem Eye Hospital, are all independent. They are not operated or owned by the Palestinian Authority. They are faith-based or linked to an internationally recognised agency. They are the only Palestinian hospitals in East Jerusalem and they serve the health needs of the residents of East Jerusalem and patients from the West Bank and Gaza.



In many respects the level of skill of their doctors, nurses and therapists is drawn from the long-standing relationship with their Israeli counterparts, many of whom teach at these hospitals or mentor Palestinian health workers at their own.

Project Rozana, which was launched in Australia in 2013 and is run by Australians, and is now a global enterprise, has made significant investments in people and

programs at St John and Augusta Victoria. Both hospitals are beacons of light, exemplifying the benefits that flow to Palestinian civil society from building capacity through close professional relationships with their Israeli counterparts.

Hani Saleh is a case in point. He is a Palestinian physician who treats children with challenging blood cancers. Saleh works at the Lutheran World Federation-

owned Augusta Victoria Hospital in East Jerusalem, which can trace its origins back to 1910.

Saleh did his specialist training in pediatric haemato-oncology at Sheba Medical Centre near Tel Aviv and Hadassah hospital in Jerusalem. When he started his training in 2002, every one of the more than 150 Palestinian children presenting annually with complex blood cancers had to be treated in Israel. Saleh identified a

gap and felt a calling to answer it. In 2006, with the full support and encouragement of his Israeli mentors, Saleh opened a one-bed pediatric oncology unit at AVH. Fast forward 12 years and that one-bed unit is now a fully functional department handling the needs of 90 per cent of Palestinian children with blood cancer.

Those needing bone marrow transplants are still referred to Hadassah but within five years or

so the AVH team will be ready to cover these complex treatments.

Building Palestinian health capacity has the dual benefit of empowering Palestinians to look after the health needs of their own community while reducing Palestinian dependence on the Israeli health system.

This was the driver behind Project Rozana, which is committed to building bridges to better understanding between Israelis and Palestinians through health.

Health is the only area of civil society where people from both sides meet on equal terms and in a mutually respectful way. This ensures robust, regular and appropriate professional consultations between physicians on both sides in pursuit of the best health outcomes for Palestinian patients.

In an environment where many Israelis and Palestinians are being fed news every day that demonises the other, this productive, enlightened and broad-based interaction between the two sides is a ray of hope in an otherwise increasingly dark landscape.

It is precisely these initiatives and relationships that need to be enhanced and embraced.

It is beyond comprehension why the Trump administration would take a sledgehammer to the vision of two peoples living side-by-side in peace. This is counterintuitive to President Trump's often-stated aim of bringing Israelis and Palestinians together. It just doesn't make sense.

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