Israeli charity sows “seeds of peace”

As the conflict in the Middle East continues, a charity in Israel with links to Canada is trying to ensure that children with cardiac problems are given the best medical care, regardless of where they're from.

Dr. Lior Sasson and his team, which will soon include a surgeon now training in Canada, have performed thousands of heart surgeries on children from both sides of the conflict zone and beyond for the Save a Child's Heart (SACH) Foundation. Based at the Wolfson Medical Center in Holon, Israel, just south of Tel Aviv, Sasson and his 80-member team — including anesthesiologists, technicians and nurses — largely volunteer their time with SACH, but are otherwise employed at Wolfson.

Since being founded in 1995, SACH has facilitated heart surgeries on more than 3400 children. About half are from the Arab world, 10% are from Israel and the remaining 40% are from Africa, Asia, elsewhere in the Middle East and more recently Azerbaijan, or are refugees from Syria.

Even when borders are closed between Palestine and Israel, SACH attempts to leap logistical hurdles to transport children into Holon. “During the recent hostilities, whenever there was a lull, there was a kid and a grandparent or a parent coming from Gaza,” says Dr. Bernie Goldman, a Toronto surgeon, chair of the Canadian branch of SACH and author of a book on the organization's history: *Mending Hearts, Building Bridges*.

To facilitate Iraqi, Kurdish and Gaza transfers, it works with Shevet Achim, a Christian group in Israel with a hostel in Jerusalem, to house patients and families. SACH has facilitated surgeries on more than 1600 patients from the Palestinian authority.

“We have to help any child that needs medical assistance and it doesn't matter if he belongs to Hamas,” says Sasson.

Dr. Lior Sasson (left) and Dr. Hagi Dekel perform heart surgery on a child as part of their work with Save a Child's Heart Foundation in Holon, Israel.

He views these Palestinian children as “seeds for peace” amidst the ongoing conflict and prides himself on saving children regardless of politics. “I think children should be out of this game.”

The parents of these children know that when there is no help available in their country, they must travel into enemy territory. Mothers are understandably anxious when they arrive. But then “she sees that we treat her fairly, and her child, the same way we treat an Israeli child. Her child is in bed next to an Israeli child,” says Sasson.

Sasson has performed 200–250 surgeries annually since joining SACH in 1995. As SACH's sole surgeon, often doing two surgeries a day, the work can be exhausting, admits Sasson, who is 54 years old.

He is eagerly awaiting the arrival of another Israeli surgeon who is getting additional training in Canada. Dr. Hagi Dekel, 42, who was a pediatric surgeon

at Wolfson, is completing fellowship at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto, which raises more than \$1 million annually for SACH.

Dekel is looking forward to further supervision under Sasson and eventually performing surgeries on his own. He says he has gained invaluable experience in his two years in Canada. “I'm coming back to Israel as a completely different surgeon.”

With Dekel's arrival in Israel in the summer of 2015, Sasson hopes to eventually double the number of surgeries SACH performs.

SACH also recruits volunteers from its 11 branches. Toronto resident Alanna Galper, 19, recently assisted children post-surgery. “A lot of the kids come without their parents so just to give them something to do and make them happy while they're

here.” Galper had a congenital heart defect that required surgery and says the care she received motivated her to get involved with the organization. “It's my way of giving back and I can relate to the kids.”

Sasson's motivation stems from what he sees as a similar moral obligation. He donates about half his surgical time to this cause; for the other half, he's head of cardiothoracic surgery at Wolfson. Over the years, he has trained dozens of surgeons from countries such as Ethiopia and Romania, as well as Palestine. He also travels to medical missions at SACH partner sites in the developing world to teach, train and operate.

Sasson has no plans to slow down and says he is eager to have another surgeon at his side. “I'm only 54,” he says. “I hope to be doing this a lot longer.” — Adam Miller, Holon, Israel

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