

Looking at hope with new eyes

The sound of 'Oyooni' could mean different things to people residing in different parts of the globe. Although in colloquial translation from Arabic it spells out 'my eyes', it is also used widely as a term of endearment among Arabs, meaning 'my loved one'. The town of Uyuni (pronounced the same as Oyooni) in southern Bolivia is famous for the world's largest salt pans, and in Korea, Oyooni is a popular brand name. In one part of the world though, the sounds spells out a world of difference....

In Palestine - although conditions are improving slowly - medical infrastructure largely remains inadequate, underdeveloped and often improvised. The Oyooni Mobile Eye Clinic is attempting to make a difference in manifold ways, and here, among its people, Oyooni is a word that simply signals hope.

In a single statistical example, although the population of the West Bank comprises over three million people, long suffering residents are treated by only about 12 specialised ophthalmologists. And while approximately 14 percent of them suffer from diabetes, there is no evidence on record that even a single doctor is qualified in diabetic ophthalmology.

Addressing the crux of this problem - and numerous others that are similar in nature - Dubai based **Dr. Ali Dabbagh** started Oyooni in July 2009, as a non-profit organisation dedicated to bringing sight to the blind, and hope to many others - by preventing the devastating side effects of diabetic retinal damage.

The principal aim of the organisation is to raise funds to purchase new equipment for the screening, and to register and treat patients in the West Bank and across the rest of Palestine - in schools, camps, and communities located in Jenin, Beit Jalla, Ramallah, Gaza and Dheishah. A secondary mission is the training of all interested local cadres - in recognising and managing diabetes.

Oyooni collaborates with the Palestine Red Crescent Society, Ministry of Health, the newly formed Palestine Diabetes Institute and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), and extends assistance to any local health provider requesting help. Dr. Dabbagh also works closely with the Palestinian Children's Relief Fund, with the intention and hope of bringing in children from Palestine to Dubai for appropriate treatment.

With over two decades of extensive general and ophthalmic practice, close to ten years of specialised experience in the management of glaucoma and diabetes, and a Master's degree in medical law, Dr Dabbagh lends Oyooni a strong and focused identity.

After an initial survey at the inception of the organisation, Oyooni has conducted several trips to Palestine aided and supported by 'Zyara' volunteers. In August 2009, the pre-visit target of screening 50 patients over a two week period was exceeded by over 400 percent, resulting in a total of 257 patients being screened on site.

A follow-up trip conducted in October 2009 resulted in several hundred patients being screened and assessed, and scheduled

for follow up or consultancy. Arrangements were made to initiate a series of 'Visual Acuity Screening' for pre-school children and school students, in refugee camps and the programme is expected to commence in April 2010, at the Jenin camp.

Dr Dabbagh is also planning to establish a Low Vision Aid (LVA) clinic at the Shurooq School, and two ophthalmic units at the proposed Diabetic Centre located at the Dheishah Refugee camp. The tertiary unit will focus on laser management and treatment, while the secondary unit will be dedicated to the screening of all referred diabetic patients from various primary health centres.

Oyooni has continued to grow with the support of various NGOs, and in a more significant manner from personal contributions of time, effort and financial contributions from Dr Dabbagh's family, friends and his colleagues at DHCC.

Their next venture is a fundraising event in Dubai in late April - both to raise awareness of their various programmes and to seek financial assistance for investments in much needed equipment and supplies.

For more information, updates, or to support Oyooni, a visit to their website www.oyooni.org would be helpful.



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