

letters to the editor

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The Daniel Turnberg Middle East Travel Fellowship Scheme: cooperation in place of conflict

There are many reasons to be gloomy about the continuing conflicts in the Middle East. The media are replete with reports of terror and destruction and continue to focus on the animosity between Arab nations and Israel with little regard paid to the many positive but unreported interactions at the Israeli and Palestinian grassroots. In assessing the impact of the Daniel Turnberg Fellowship Scheme we have been encouraged by the many heartening stories of collaboration and reconciliation.

The fund was set up in the name of our late son who was killed in a plane crash in Malawi in June 2007. The scheme reflects his keen interests in research – he was a lecturer in renal medicine – and in promoting better relations between the Middle East, Israel and the UK. It aims to encourage interactions between the UK and Israel and its Arab neighbours in the medical sciences with the longer-term goal of increasing mutual understanding and tolerance (*Clin Med* August 2009 p 304).

After thorough scientific review, 20 fellows were selected to spend up to four weeks in institutions of their choosing to learn new techniques, gain further experience and develop plans for continuing collaboration. The Royal College of Physicians was a generous finder of no less than six of these. Those coming to the UK included seven from Israel, five from the West Bank, two from each of Egypt and Jordan and one from Lebanon with three from the UK going to the Middle East, two to Israel and one to East Jerusalem.

In meeting many of the fellows we were made aware of their high level of enthu-

siasm and of their appreciation of the opportunity provided by the scheme. Without exception they have developed programmes for continued collaborative research on their return home.

Their individual stories are uplifting. An Egyptian doctor had never been out of her home country before and was overwhelmed by her reception. She has now set up a joint project with her host department in London. A Palestinian researcher has forged several links with researchers in London and an Israeli now has a strong joint project with his host department and is working on a proposal with a Jordanian researcher he met here. A fellow at the Weizmann Institute in Israel has planned a number of joint research activities with neuroscientists in Edinburgh. New friendships have been fostered and, for example, some supervising UK hosts are now planning visits to the Middle East and Israel, countries where they have not previously been. Such outcomes can only increase understanding and respect.

We met some of our fellows in their own institutions when we visited Israel recently to learn more about their work. Two paediatric hospitals were particularly interesting because of the positive role they are playing in caring for Palestinian children. We learnt that in the Safra Children's Hospital at Tel Hashomer, near Tel Aviv, at any one time there are 30 to 40 children from Gaza with their families receiving specialised care such as cardiac surgery or bone marrow transplantation. More than half of their cardiac surgery patients are from Gaza. A similar story is told at the Schneider Children's Hospital where we saw many Palestinian children being cared for and where a paediatrician

from Gaza spent 18 months training in paediatric oncology.

One story of particular poignancy was that of Dr Izzeldin Abuelaish, a Gazan paediatrician, three of whose children were tragically killed in the conflict when a bomb fell on his home. Another daughter and his niece who were badly injured were airlifted out and treated in the intensive care unit at Safra Children's Hospital. Fortunately they each recovered and returned home. In a remarkable story of reconciliation, Dr Abuelaish placed a memorial plaque to his three children, together with a photograph of them, in the hallway of Safra Hospital to which he continues to refer patients.

There are many such interactions but they remain largely unpublicised, in part at least because of the fear that Hamas will clamp down on them. But these incidents cast a different and more hopeful light on the complex issues surrounding the Middle East and they have made us even more determined to continue with our scheme.

The panel for the next round was set up by the Academy of Medical Sciences (for further details and an application form: www.acmedsci.ac.uk/p175.html) and will meet to assess the applications in March 2010. We are hopeful that we will be able to support rather more than 20 fellows in 2010. We hope that schemes such as ours, that promote collaboration, will play a role in contributing to a greater understanding and mutual respect.

LESLIE TURNBERG

Former president

Royal College of Physicians

The value of the post-take ward round

Editor – Chaponda and colleagues recently highlighted the impact of shift working on patient care continuity and learning opportunities for acute medicine trainees (*Clin*