

# ‘Heaven’s gate, built in Jerusalem’s wall?’<sup>1</sup> effects of the Israeli-built wall on a Palestinian medical school

Sylvia Watkins

**Sylvia Watkins DM**  
FRCP, Honorary  
Consultant  
Physician, Lister  
Hospital,  
Stevenage

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**ABSTRACT – The checkpoints and the new Israeli-built wall separating Israel from the Occupied Palestinian Territories has created serious problems for the Palestinian Al-Quds Medical School and for the health of its local population.**

**KEY WORDS: final year medical examinations, Israeli-built wall, Jerusalem**

Imagine a situation where sick people, many of whom are poverty-stricken, have grave difficulties in reaching a nearby hospital; where mothers deliver at roadsides resulting in significant mortality; and where students cannot get to their classes or even to their exams. And all this happens because they are detained at checkpoints.

It sounds like the medical Dark Ages or a nightmare scenario in a developing country, and it could indeed represent such situations. But I speak of the twenty-first century conditions in the Palestinian West Bank and Gaza – a land surrounded by one of the most highly developed countries in the Western world.

There is a superb Medical School at the Al-Quds University in East Jerusalem, where I recently acted as

external examiner in medicine for the MD (finals) qualification. There are also two University hospitals in East Jerusalem. There are plenty of empty beds in these hospitals, however, because many of the patients in their main catchment area, the West Bank cannot get permits to enter Jerusalem; some spend hours or even days at checkpoints and a few die there. The same is true of other Palestinian hospitals and the situation has been aggravated by the building of the Wall. Over the past few years, Israel has been building this Wall, separating it from the Occupied Palestinian Territories, supposedly to reduce acts of terrorism. This has had disastrous effects on Palestinian access to healthcare as many hospitals are now physically cut off from the populations they serve, making access increasingly difficult. The International Court of Justice declared the Wall illegal in July 2004, but the building of this separation barrier continues at an alarming rate, regardless of that ruling.

All 191 United Nations member states supported the Millennium Development Goals,<sup>2</sup> which include an undertaking to ‘reduce infant mortality’ and ‘improve maternal health’ in less developed countries by 2015. Israel, however, has failed to come to terms with the fact that its actions at home are actually causing an increase in morbidity and death rates in neighbouring Palestine, where the maternal and infant mortality rates are about four times those of Israel.<sup>3</sup>

Because of the logistical problems caused by the Wall, in June 2005, the teaching hospitals in East Jerusalem were not able to hold the final clinical examinations for the MD on their own sites because of a lack of suitable patients; the exams therefore had to be held at the district hospital of Hebron in the West Bank instead. Twelve graduates from Gaza could subsequently not get permits to attend the graduation ceremony at the medical school in East Jerusalem.

The magnificent Al-Quds Medical School building is nearing completion. It is sensibly situated less than a mile from the two university hospitals but the journey, which used to take a few minutes, can now take several hours: the Wall goes straight across the access road and the necessary detour is long and delayed by checkpoints. Despite these major problems, the achievements of the students are



**Fig 1. The view of the wall from Al-Quds Medical School**  
(photo: SM Watkins).

outstanding. The examination standards are stringent and equivalent to those in the UK, and the best candidates would get honours at any university in the world. The Medical School can be proud of its success, particularly in view of the difficulties it has to face.

The day-to-day problems remain, however, for the patients, students and staff. The terrorism seen in Israel, Palestine and elsewhere is not a solution. It lies within the power of other Western nations to promote bilateral recognition of rights and security, and the upholding of international agreements and legislation. This in turn could lead to mutual respect and ultimately peace, prosperity, good healthcare and decent educational opportunities for all.

In spite of all the problems, the Al-Quds Medical School continues to produce excellent young doctors – the question is, how many of them will stay in Palestine under the present conditions?

## References

- 1 William Blake. *Jerusalem*
- 2 [www.un.org/millenniumgoals](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals)
- 3 [www.childinfo.org](http://www.childinfo.org)