



MMS Bulletin #108

"Gewalt, Gewalterfahrung und Gesundheit"

Medical work in Gaza

"...at least in prison you know when you will be set free"

Von Abdal Hadi AbuKhoussa

On the evening of 27th February the main Gaza office of Oxfam partner, the Palestinian Medical Relief Society (PMRS) and an equipped mobile clinic were severely damaged in an Israeli air strike targeting the neighbouring Ministry of the Interior. PMRS' stock of prescription drugs, its generator and vital medical equipment were destroyed along with the mobile clinic by the strength of the blast of the explosion. The difficult work of a medical NGO in a conflict region.

The attack came at a time when PMRS has never been busier. Since Hamas' takeover in June 2007, Gaza has been subject to a tighter blockade by Israel than ever, severely limiting the amount of people and goods coming and going from the territory. International donors have also cut funding to Hamas-run institutions, including the Ministry of Health. This has made specialist medical treatment and supplies particularly hard to come by, especially for those unable to afford private clinics. It's to meet this gap that the organisation has stepped in.

Filling a gap

PMRS is one of the largest health NGOs in the occupied Palestinian territories. Last year it provided support to around 130'000 people in the Gaza Strip through its mobile clinics, pharmacies and medical supply centres. And in recent months the number of people seeking its help has soared. In its clinic in Abu Tueimeh village, 300% more people have been seeking PMRS medical services in the past month because the governmental clinics in villages nearby were temporarily not functioning and continue to have insufficient doctors and medication.

Before the blockade, PMRS supported around 45 chronic disease patients a month. But with the decline of governmental services for chronic disease patients, that number has now risen to nearly 500. "The three main chronic diseases we help treat are hypertension, diabetes and heart and vascular diseases though we also provide support in many other areas," Dr. Aed Yaghi from PMRS explains. "Since Hamas' takeover, there's less medication available from the Ministry of Health or the military medical services. Chronic disease patients are particularly affected by this."

“Moreover, fewer and fewer ordinary Gazans are able to afford the cost of medical tests and prescription medicines,” Aed Yaghi continues. “There are high rates of unemployment so people have less money. But the cheap governmental clinics aren’t functioning properly. At a private clinic you have to pay around 40 shekels (around £5.70) for a prescription. At PMRS we only charge four shekels (57 pence). And that’s only if people can afford it. We charge nothing if they don’t have enough money to pay.”

Building back better

PMRS’ staff didn’t waste any time in searching for a new base after their office was hit in the air strike. “We didn’t want to leave the office without fixing up the worst of the damage, so the staff split up, with half of us clearing up the building, and the other half looking for somewhere else to work from,” Aed explains.

“We know from experience that once a governmental building has been targeted in an air strike it’s likely it will be targeted again,” Aed states. “Our main priority was to find a new office somewhere that was safe, not near any governmental buildings that might be targeted in the future.”

Staff began working from home using their mobile phones and private internet connections to source supplies and to begin the hunt for a new place to work. Just three days after the bombing, PMRS had found new buildings to house its main offices and medical clinic. They plan to have these up and running within a month.

Despite the higher rent it has to pay for its new offices and the difficulties it faces in restarting its work, PMRS remains determined to get back on its feet and continue supporting those most in need. There are already plans to have a new mobile clinic up and running by the start of April. With the scarcity of vehicles for sale in Gaza because of the closure, there is even talk of converting an old car into a new clinic to help reach more people.

“We are living in difficult circumstances,” Aed tells us. “We really hope talks of a ceasefire will become official. Life here is worse than a prison, because at least in prison you know when you will be set free. We don’t know when Gaza will be open again. We don’t feel that we are free.”

**Abdal Hadi AbuKhoussa is the director of Palestinian Medical Relief Society (PMRS).*

<http://www.pmr.ps/last/index.php> Contact: mrcgaza@palnet.com



Kontakt

Deutschschweiz

Medicus Mundi Schweiz
Murbacherstrasse 34
CH-4056 Basel
Tel. +41 61 383 18 10
info@medicusmundi.ch

Suisse romande

Medicus Mundi Suisse
Rue de Varembé I
CH-1202 Genève
Tél. +41 22 920 08 08
contact@medicusmundi.ch

Bankverbindung

Basler Kantonalbank, Aeschen, 4002 Basel
Medicus Mundi Schweiz, 4056 Basel
IBAN: CH40 0077 0016 0516 9903 5
BIC: BKBBCHBBXXX