

The Ship of Hope: Countering the Stereotype of Foreign Dependence February 2015

By Joseph Coffee

There is perhaps not a more poetic place for a hospital than the Sayeda Zeinab district of traditional Egyptian neighborhood in a district of butcher shops, dotted with minarets, mosques, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Children's Cancer Hospital – cleverly known as 'Hospital 57' for the hospital's foundation's bank account number: 57357– is built on 38,000 meters of property that used to house the old slaughterhouse. When the slaughterhouse closed in the early 80's the area became a swamp and a den for drug dealers. Now however, the hospital has grown into a shining example of pediatric healthcare.



The striking glass sphere and sail-like sun guards stand out against the background; evoking a ship-like image in stark contrast to the surrounding architecture. Any stonework on the hospital is similar to a parallel 900 year-old aqueduct. The hope is that the Children's Cancer Hospital will act as a literal and metaphorical ship of hope for many. The hospital operates under the St. Jude's model, whereby no child ever has to pay for the care they receive. Even when the scope of the care they receive exceeds their normal treatment routine. The hospital employs a number of specialists and dentists who treat other extant medical issues, all of which are covered by the hospital's St. Jude's principle. Egypt's Children's Cancer Hospital is one of the largest in the world having 185 beds, with a planned extension that would bring the total to 380.

However positive and dedicated this approach is, the hospital's origins are of a more depressing nature. During the 1980's Dr. Sherif Abuouelnaga M.D., Executive Director of Fundraising for the Hospital's Foundation as-well-as Vice President of Academic Affairs, Training, Research, and Outreach, was practicing at the National Cancer Institute. In the course of one day, 11 children died in a single of the hospital's wards. This tragedy led Dr. Sherif to quit practicing medicine. He had a vision. A vision for a future where in-patient pediatric hospital cancer-care was on an exemplary level and consequently where no more children died. Dr. Sherif's first order of business was to fundraise directly from the people of Sayeda Zeinab starting with the famous local sheikh Sha'arawi. Described by many as a fundamentalist, he was none-the-less a fundamentalist with a heart. With this hopeful and ambitious start, Dr. Sherif's dream would, after many years of dedicated work and fund raising with the likes of Sheikh Sha'arawi, become Children's Cancer Hospital.

This dedicated approach to care means that all of the doctors employed by Hospital 57357 are full time employees. Part-time jobs, as is common in many other Egyptian hospitals, are not possible here since staff are expected to give all their attention to working in this hospital alone. Around 3,000 Egyptian volunteers, from all walks of life, also support the hospital staff. Among them students and the elderly who come to volunteer their time to the Children's Cancer Hospital. In addition to the outstanding care and dedication of volunteers the

hospital strives to become a center for research. Expanding and perfecting on Western health-protocols; specifically tailoring them to this region. Even with all this support the hospital's resources are stressed. 70% of all patients come from outside Cairo. This places an incredible burden on families of patients and the hospital itself to support them.



Children's Cancer Hospital was designed to maintain 25%-30% of the total pediatric cancer-care patients. This unfortunately means that the remaining patients must seek care from the National Cancer Institute, which could be described as your typical state run hospital. The hospital itself is nowhere near as advanced or specialized as Children's Cancer Hospital. Most physicians there are not pediatric specialists and many patients come in at a very late stage, meaning they have a smaller chance of survival. Thus a stigma around hospitals and death is created whereby people avoid seeking medical care because they incorrectly assume it will harm them.



This mindset and a rising number of children requiring in-hospital cancer treatment means Children's Cancer Hospital hopes to expand. That stress on care makes them susceptible to perceived foreign investment and support. While foreign donors do give money to the hospital, they usually buy specific expensive equipment or give money to the foundation. In the years since opening in 2007, Hospital 57 has faced an uphill battle combating a troublingly typical stereotype: that Arabs rely on foreign investment to build infrastructure

comparable to Western standards. However, 85% of the starting investment has come from Egyptians.

The hospital spent a decade fundraising before opening. They took all the money that they had raised, at this point 700,000 pounds, and spent it on one 30-second television spot. That spot resonated so much with the Egyptian public that they eventually raised 30 million pounds from it. Their first investment with that money was to spend 7 million of it on an actual feasibility study for the hospital. That study showed the absolute need for this kind of specialized care in Egypt. Prior to the opening of the hospital many Egyptian physicians refused to believe that cancer could afflict children.

In the November issue of the Maadi Messenger, we first wrote about Dutch charity, 'Roses for Children'. In that article, MM editor, Cornelis Hulsman sought to bring attention to the charity and their monument to children who died too soon. That article ended with a call to action, of sorts, for an Egyptian monument within its center a rose, the symbol that links similar monuments all over the world. The Children's Cancer Hospital in Cairo has agreed to host the monument in their gardens so that it is accessible to all. But before this is realized a lot will need to be done. The Rose was presented ten years ago to then Minister of Culture Farouq Hosny. It would need to be brought to the Children's Cancer Hospital. The opening of a

monument could be linked to an activity, a workshop or something else, that would highlight the importance of work that prevents children dying too early. Thus realizing an Egyptian monument will cost time but the first steps have been made.

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