

Two Weeks in Hell on Earth; My Experiences in Hospital Theatres in Gaza - Reflections on the Dire Healthcare Situation in Gaza

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I was fortunate enough to spend some time in Gaza earlier in the crisis, and what I saw shook me to my core. Nothing I had seen or read in the news prepared me for the reality on the ground and the dire healthcare situation in the tiny strip. My reflections below are crucial to properly understanding the medical catastrophe that is unfolding as the world looks on, doing nothing.

In Gaza today, nearly all patients suffer from malnutrition, which severely impedes wound healing. The infection rate among patients is beyond imagination. Surgical instruments are rarely sterilised, and patients usually stay in overcrowded wards. This is all a result of a siege imposed by Israel, which has severely limited food and lifesaving medical supplies from entering Gaza.

My fellow medical professionals are struggling to help people in the handful of barely functional medical facilities left in the besieged Gaza Strip. They receive rare assistance from medical missions from overseas that manage to get Israeli approval to enter Gaza, like the PalMed mission that facilitated my trip to the European Hospital in Khan Younis, the only hospital functioning in southern and central Gaza. The scenes there are reminiscent of horror films: patients lie on the hospital floor propped against walls, with blood and other bodily fluids seen around waiting rooms.

The lack of equipment, medicine, and supplies has pushed the medical sector closer to total collapse. Looking around Gaza, it seems as if the apocalypse has arrived. People are on the brink, and the famine-like conditions have affected more than 90 percent of Gaza's

2.3 million people – most of whom are now internally displaced. The number of sick and wounded keeps increasing and overcrowding and poor sanitation due to lack of resources compound the challenges in the hospital. The depletion of resources means that even simple procedures are challenging, and malnourishment among so many patients complicates the healing process further. This is without mentioning the psychological effects on patients and the mental trauma their injuries cause them.

Post-operative planning and follow-up is a real challenge due to dwindling capacity in healthcare centers and the lack of medical professionals. Hundreds of medical staff have been killed or displaced. Patients who, in any NHS hospital, would receive follow-up care, however patients in Gaza have no option but to self-remedy, increasing the risk of complications, especially as malnourishment and poor sanitation are exacerbated by the war situation and the siege. The situation is inhumane; the people of Gaza are having their dignity stripped away from them. Around 80% of the patients I saw were women and children who could not even be accused of being combatants, which was especially shocking. There is no reason for them to be targeted in this way and to be victims of such senseless killing.

With the help of others, I am privileged to be involved in an initiative aimed at helping medical students in Gaza complete their studies in collaboration with the Islamic University and Al-Azhar University in Gaza, with contributions from other parties. This initiative aims to provide continuous education and training and to support

medical specialties throughout Palestine. The Medical Colleges in Gaza, including Al-Azhar University and the Islamic University, are the foundation of this initiative and will be responsible for supervising the curriculum, evaluation, and accreditation of university degrees. The curriculum for this initiative is managed primarily by the aforementioned institutions. Ultimately, this initiative would only be workable thanks to the support of external parties, with a South African company designing the educational platform for the initiative to support the victims of the Gaza War. Additionally, five medical colleges in Ireland have expressed readiness to contribute to this project, and over 250 consultants from across Europe have volunteered to teach and prepare the students for their studies.

Gaza has a young population; they have dreams and ambitions, and in the long term, I am confident in their abilities to achieve these dreams. But right now, the situation is so dire that even thinking about the decade ahead, we must be cautious. A lost decade is upon us if a ceasefire is not called imminently, with the secondary effects of the war in terms of the collapse of public health infrastructure and long-term effects of malnourishment and famine posing existential risks to the future of the young population. The people of Gaza deserve a better future; we must advocate on their behalf for a better one.

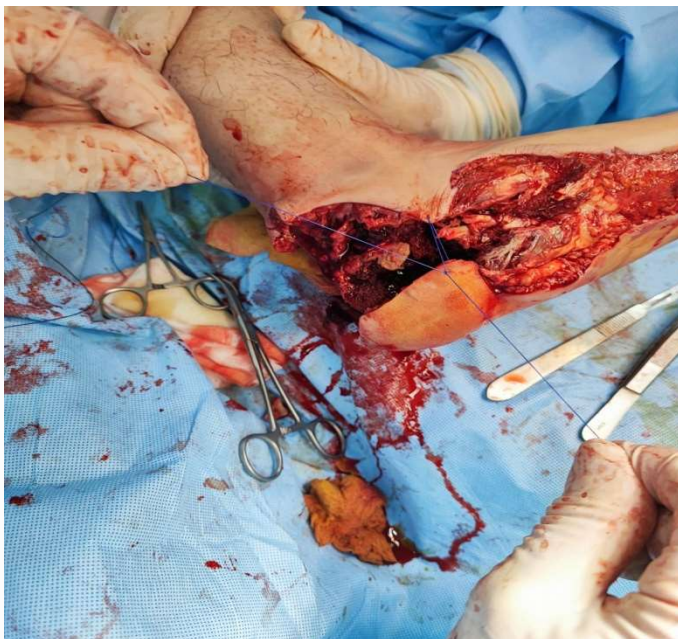


Figure 1: Attempt to Save a Young Girl's Crushed Foot from Amputation (picture is the courtesy of Dr Riyad Masharqah)

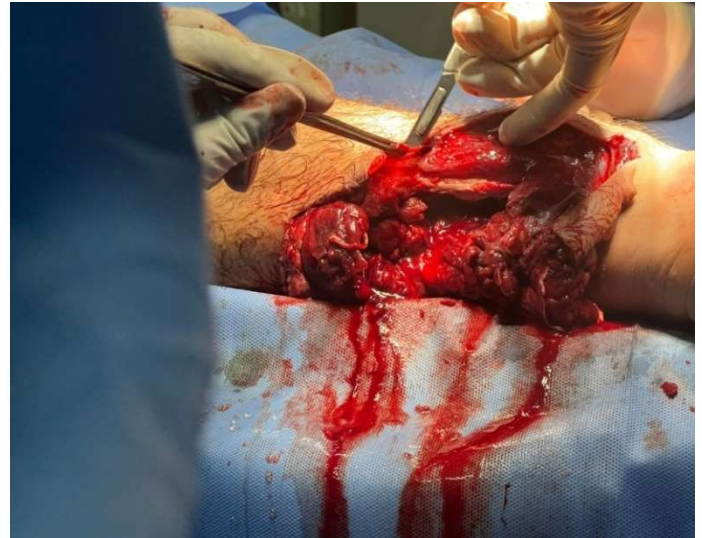


Figure 2: Managing complex wounds in Gaza presents a significant challenge (picture is the courtesy of Dr Riyad Masharqah)



Figure 3: Women and children are the main victims of the occupying forces (picture is the courtesy of Dr Riyad Masharqah)



Figure 4: Medical students have been great assets to the health sector in Gaza (picture is the courtesy of Dr Riyad Masharqah)



Figure 6 : Over 5,000 people have lost one or more limbs in Gaza (picture is the courtesy of Dr Riyad Masharqah)



Figure 5: A significant number of children sustain severe burns (picture is the courtesy of Dr Riyad Masharqah)