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*Interview with Lousin Mehrabi*

# *Negotiating a better world*



# Fighting Diabetes in Palestine



Juzoor for Health and Social Development shows that by providing support at the grassroots level and the development of national policy has achieved a really positive start in Palestine's ongoing battle with diabetes. Phase 2 of the project has plans to teach the whole community about prevention.





A diabetes diagnosis is life-changing for many people, because it becomes more important than ever to focus on diet, exercise, lifestyle, and everyday habits. This is certainly true in the Middle East where diabetes is responsible for roughly 25% of deaths in adults ages 35 to 64. The prevalence of diabetes in the Palestinian population in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem is higher than the global prevalence, 15% compared to 6% globally. However, anecdotal information from numerous sources suggest the rate could be much higher (18- 21%). Of the total diabetic population in Palestine, 95% are diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, 0.2% with gestational diabetes, and 0.1% with impaired glucose tolerance.

### **Palestine's National Diabetes Program (2017 – Ongoing)**

Juzoor for Health and Social Development and The World Diabetes Foundation (WDF) has partnered to improve access to care, advocacy, and prevent the onset of diabetes with many partners including the Ministry of Health, Dan Church Aid, Augusta Victoria Hospital, UNRWA, and Lions Club International.

### **The Turning Point**

The first phase of the Palestinian National Diabetes Project was launched in 2017 as a collaborative programme between multi-sectoral stakeholders. Under the Palestinian Ministry of Health (MoH), the national diabetes program subsequently evolved into a more integrated preventative approach on the national level, including, UNRWA, Augusta Victoria

Hospital (AVH), monitored by Dan Church Aid (DCA), and implemented and managed by Juzoor. For the first time ever and with the help of Juzoor, the project brought together main healthcare providers from the public sector. Juzoor's involvement and management of this national project and its high visibility and credibility also encouraged the private sector, such as the Bank of Palestine, Ramallah Municipality, Caritas, Lions Club International, STENO diabetes centre, and other local women organisations, to get involved as this crucial initiative is a social responsibility for all.

Many of the key stakeholders played critical roles in the development of the initiative throughout the years. In 2003, with funding from the WDF, AVH was able to open the first



model of excellence centre in its existing diabetes care centre that acts as a referral for the Palestinian population. Additionally, Ramallah Municipality is working hard with Juzoor to contribute to better infrastructure that promotes options for exercise such as pathways, parks, along with restrictions on smoking and harmful beverages, and the promotion of a healthy lifestyle that aims to reduce the burden of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs). STENO is currently training AVH staff which shows a strong interest in current and future projects.

It is specifically important to improve diabetes care in

humanitarian settings such as in Palestine. The devastating infrastructure, political instability, lack of access of movement, restricted access to healthcare services especially in marginalised areas and Area C towns, a lack of basic services, high unemployment rates, and food insecurity are all key factors that contribute to the rise of NCDs.

**Results in the first phase of the project included:**

1. **14,300 diabetic** patients receiving better quality of service in the new three model clinics.
2. **10,300 patients** screened and 92 new cases of Type 2 diabetes mellitus (T2DM) were diagnosed.
3. **300 healthcare** providers received training on diabetes prevention, treatment and management.
4. **5,000 patients** screened for retinopathy and around 24% were diagnosed with one type of retinopathy and referred for further examination.
5. **300 cases** of GDM patients were treated and followed-up.
6. **3,000 patients** screened for diabetic foot complications.
7. **100 health professionals**, including nutritionists and social workers, were trained on diabetes prevention, treatment and management.
8. **11,000 beneficiaries** received information through awareness raising activities about diabetes





and an additional 10,000 beneficiaries from schools and universities also received information.

9. **900,000 indirect** beneficiaries received information through media outlets and social media campaigns.
10. **250 school children** who are overweight or obese are receiving follow ups by nutritionists in three areas in the WB focusing on lifestyle modification, proper nutrition, and fitness exercise as a primary intervention.
11. **1,600** HbA1c tests were done through the HbA1c machine that was donated to the MoH model centre in 2019.
12. **21 foot ulcers** were followed up in the newly opened UNRWA Qalqilya model centre; 14 of the patients were healed and 7 are still in the process of treatment with 0 cases of amputation in 2019.
13. **19 foot ulcers** were followed up in the newly opened MoH Beir Nabala model centre; 11 were healed and 8 are still in the process of treatment with 0 cases of amputation in 2019.

## The second phase

The second phase is directly anchored in, and contributing to the NCD Action Plan and the National Health Strategy **2017- 2022**, which prioritises NCDs screening programs, including diabetes,

and improve diagnostic services. Based on lessons learnt from the first phase, the second phase of the project will place a much greater emphasis on maternal health and nutrition and its links to NCDs, especially diabetes, with a special focus on public health intervention programmes (HIP).

In the second phase **2020-2023**, Lions Clubs International joined program due to its importance and impact. It is hoped that results will exceed targets achieved in the first phase of the project. Twelve clinics from the MoH and UNRWA are equipped to become diabetes centres, expecting to reach twice as many health care providers through the training sessions; **25,000** people will be screened by the project, including **10,000** refugees who are at high risk. **20,000** diabetic patients will receive better quality of care and service, including type2 diabetics, type1 diabetics, those with gestational diabetes, and **6000** patients to be screened for retinopathy and **6000** for foot related complications. **20,000** school children aged **6-18** years to be targeted by events highlighting lifestyle modification and NCDs. More than **50,000** people from marginalised and vulnerable geographical locations will be reached via awareness sessions, events and campaigns, and more than **2 million** of the general population will be reached through TV, radio adverts, social media, etc.

Juzoor in partnership with Bank of Palestine and the support of the program's partners have launched

the National Diabetes Campaign for its third year during November 2021. The campaign was launched nationally to coincide with World Diabetes Day. The Theme of the campaign this year goes along with the global theme, which addresses the access to diabetes care. The campaign aims to raise awareness among the community on the importance of healthy eating and physical activity to prevent the occurrence of diabetes and prevent complications. In addition to that, the diabetes mobile clinic has visited different governorates in the country providing free screening and blood testing services for the public. Nevertheless, billboards, radio adverts, visits to elderly care homes, awareness events at the public hospitals and interviews with specialists has been ongoing to make the community more aware about the risk factors of diabetes, how to manage it and where to access specialist advice and services. ■

