

The Berry Patch

Random thoughts and observations about life in Israel, life in medical school, life with an extremely spoiled pet, and life in general.

Thursday, April 19, 2007

Students Explore Bedouin Community

Based on article submitted to Synapse (my school's newsletter)
by Ory and Susie

Anyone who was ever a tourist in Israel has likely experienced "Bedouin Hospitality". Typically, tea and perhaps a light lunch are served in a tent, with guests seated on a carpet. A gracious host recalls stories of nomadic life, flowing robes, desert sands as far as the eye can see, and freedom from many of the confines of modern society. The guests may then take some snap shots with a camel or donkey.

Last week, 12 students set out on an AMSA-sponsored trip to Taibeh that was not this picturesque, but instead focused on seeing one real Bedouin community and learning about the obstacles that the people living there face. Organizer Clare (2009) said "I wanted to get everyone out of Ramat Aviv, and show us another part of Israel that is very present and important, and that we wouldn't get to see otherwise."

Israel's Bedouin community has been slowly transitioning from nomadic to urban life since the 1950s; the group that we visited in Taibeh was relocated from the Negev to the center of Israel in the 1970s. There, they found that their neighbors in their new Arab municipality viewed them in a very negative light, primarily because they did not resist being relocated by the Israeli government. Unfavorable perceptions persist to this day. Additionally, within the community itself, there is a continued struggle to bridge a generation gap between nomad elders and modern youth, to integrate the children into the local educational system, and to deal with a host of other problems, including unemployment, crime, sanitation, and nutrition.

Taibeh Pediatric Clinic

Our day began with a visit to Taibeh's pediatric clinic. Dr. Lutfi Jaber showed us around the facility, whose staff of 4 physicians and 5 nurses typically handles 200 daily visits. In addition to pediatric primary care, the clinic offers a day observation unit, as well as appointments with neurologists, endocrinologists, surgeons, and other specialists who are there for one or two days each month. Dr. Jaber explained that with this setup, 80% of pediatric pathology can be addressed outside of the hospital.

Dr. Jaber described two issues that particularly affect the Bedouin community: consanguineous marriage and associated recessive genetic disorders, and iron deficiency anemia. According to Dr. Jaber, currently about 44% of marriages within Israel's Arab community are a union of two members of the same family. However, due to public health education efforts, only 10% of these marriages now involve first cousins, down from over 20% in 1992. The autosomal recessive defects that gain prevalence as a result of consanguineous marriage vary from village to village, and Taibeh has its own variety of alpha thalassemia, known as "Taibeh Thalassemia." Dr. Jaber said that the practice of inter-marrying within the family is ingrained in the culture, so rather than trying to eliminate it, efforts focus on the promotion of pre-natal diagnosis.

While genetic disorders are rooted in ancient practices, modernization introduced health problems into this population as well. Currently, many



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Current Rotation

None

Standard Disclaimer

All references to patients are modified to obscure identifying information. Examples of things I might change include the age, the diagnosis, and the gender (about half the time). References to my friends and family are as accurate as they are in my head, and I do not modify them.

This is a personal journal of a person who really doesn't know much of anything yet. Nothing I say should be interpreted as medical advice.

Come On Now, People



Y'all are currently commenting on my blog on about 1% of visits. You can do better. I know you can.

children in the city are malnourished, and a majority of these children suffer from iron deficiency anemia. Health workers have responded by providing nutritional supplements for all children between the ages of 5 and 12 months. However, it has been found that with respect to iron-deficiency anemia, despite good compliance, 35% are still symptomatic. Dr. Jaber believes that the problem is in the preparation endorsed and provided by the government. Research he conducted within the community has helped the clinic to demonstrate the more effective absorption of a ferrous - based supplement over the ferric compound currently used. Dr. Jaber expects that changing the formulation will reduce or eliminate much of the iron-deficiency problem currently experienced by this population.

Dr. Jaber is an advocate of primary care, and urges students not to underestimate the opportunities for research working within a community presents. He said that anyone interested in studying the health issues of the Bedouin community should contact him by e-mail.



Hospitality

Following the clinic visit, we were taken to a restaurant where we were treated to semi-traditional hospitality of hummus, shakshuka, and coffee. Despite being very poor, our hosts displayed the high standards of hospitality that Bedouins are known for, and we continued to be offered food and beverage throughout the afternoon. Rachel (2009) noted that "The people of the Bedouin village were so warm and welcoming". Aliza (2009) added that "It was really wonderful to see different ways that people live in Israel. There is such a variety of experience, and they are so hospitable."

Bedouin Association for Education and Health Development

After lunch, we were taken to the Bedouin neighborhood, outside of town. Unlike Taibeh itself, which is a modern city accented with Arab influences such as arched doorways and an occasional mosque, the Bedouin neighborhood looks more like a third world country than like Tel Aviv's Jaffa. Streets and walkways are completely absent, and residents live in an odd mix of tents, makeshift metal shelters, and stone houses of various sizes and shapes, scattered amidst dirt, weeds, piles of trash, and a collection of farm animals.

Current Conditions in Tel Aviv



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At this point, our host, Saeed Azbarga, the Director the Bedouin Association for Education and Health Development, gave us a brief history of the people living in this neighborhood. Saeed said that the Bedouin came to the center of Israel from the Negev in the 1970s, after their land was confiscated as part of Israel's peace agreement with Egypt. Israeli military bases that were evacuated from Sinai were relocated to the Negev, and the Bedouin who lived in the bases' new locations subsequently accepted the small compensation offered to them and relocated to the center of Israel. The Bedouin were not accepted by the other Arab groups already living in Taibeh for many reasons. In the 1970s and 80s, Arab nationalism was very strong in Taibeh, which is near Tul Karem and Qualqilya, and the Bedouins who cooperated with the relocation were viewed as traitors. There are also differences in culture, lifestyle and dialect. Saeed said that many of the Arabs in Taibeh view themselves as "high society" and feel that interacting with Bedouins is below them. In 1988, the local municipality decided to destroy all of the stone homes in the Bedouin neighborhood, because they were built without permits. Saeed said that a "group of Bedouin youth went to Taibeh and threatened to destroy every stone home in the city if any more Bedouin homes were destroyed." No additional structures have been torn down since, but tension continues to exist between the two groups.



Today, the Bedouin in Taibeh deal with a host of struggles, stacked on top of each other. They struggle with Israel's Jewish government, with Taibeh's corrupt Arab municipality, and with an internal struggle between two generations. Saeed said that the *youth* generation, which includes those aged 40 years and younger, values privacy, rights, and increased economic power,

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while the *elders*, aged 45 and up, value freedom, homage, and respect. The youth would like to make many changes, including improvements to the neighborhood's infrastructure, privacy, education, and health. The elders believe that a tent is better than a stone home, believe that time is the best cure to most ailments, accept life as it is, and oppose change.

The Bedouin Association for Education and Health Development is a group of this "youth" whose aim is to identify the leaders of both groups, and then work with these leaders to build cooperation. Although there are many infrastructure problems (sewage, clean drinking water, etc.) the Bedouin Association decided to tackle education first, because "nobody opposes education." Saeed said "When our pupils have education, this is the starting point for any social change."



Some students had difficulty understanding how the association, by focusing on education, could ignore the problems of sanitation and contamination of the drinking water. Darren (2009) said "I was surprised that Saeed did not sound more concerned about the sewage overflow and infected water issues, as I thought these take precedent. Perhaps what they have is working well enough and no one else is concerned about it either too much. Those are two projects that sound like such a huge undertaking though."



At the end of the tour, we asked Saeed what was next for the association. He said that they were working on fundraising and public relations. Saeed said we were helping just by being there, because now they have 12 more people who are aware of their issues, and may answer questions about the Bedouin community both in Israel and in the US. The association is now starting

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advocacy projects that will teach people about their civil rights. They are also planning a health education project that will focus on preventing accidents in the home, improving nutrition, and acquiring basic first aid skills.

Overall, the students who attended the trip agreed that it exposed them to a side of Israel they had been unaware of. Rob (2010) said that he enjoyed "being able to see the native population through the non-tourist eyes." He added, "I was disappointed that most of the community was in the mosque, so we didn't get to see many adults. I enjoyed seeing the kids running around." Rachel (2009) said "I can't help but feeling a great sense of guilt. It's unbelievable to think that I live in the mini metropolis in Tel Aviv, but just minutes away are people living in a place similar to a third world country." Other students were surprised that the children living in conditions that were so shocking to us had showed such vitality and joy for life. Alex (2010) said "It was inspiring to me that all of the beautiful little children with the bright blue eyes, and to see so much life and joy in the midst of pretty shoddy conditions."

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