



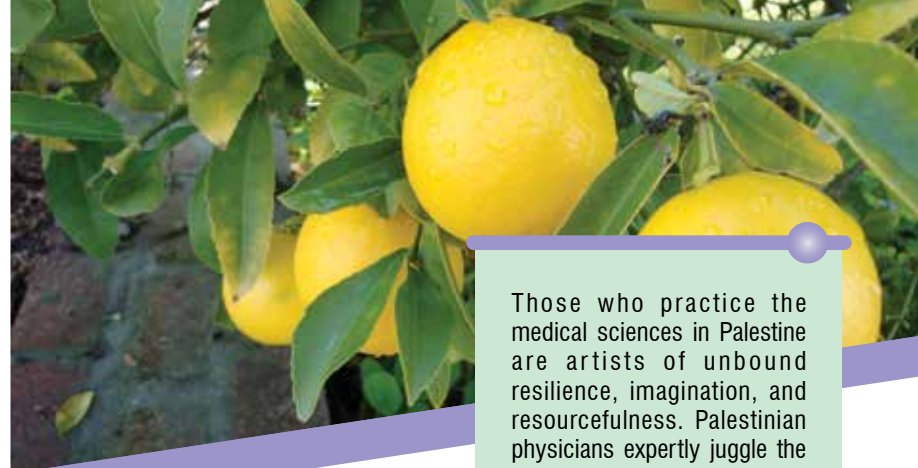
# Medical Lemons Turned into Lemonade!

By Nizar F. Maraqa



This is not a memoir, nor am I trying to impart any wisdom I do not possess. I merely want to thank you, my fellow Palestinians, for your love of life despite all odds. You have instilled in our people an appreciation of science that lights our path, even in the darkest of hours.

Having journeyed through life first as a young schoolboy in “pre-Intifada” Ramallah, then as a paediatrician trying to give back a little of what I owe to our children, and now as an expatriate looking for ways to stay relevant and engaged, I find myself marvelling at the lessons I learn every day from my teachers, fellow physicians, and former trainees who practice medicine in Palestine.



Those who practice the medical sciences in Palestine are artists of unbound resilience, imagination, and resourcefulness. Palestinian physicians expertly juggle the provision of medical care, their role as educators, and their scientific research despite internal and external obstacles. On the other hand, statistics show that approximately 81 percent of people living in isolated zones and enclaves cannot access primary health clinics, medical centers, and hospitals as needed.\*

When you read about managing bacterial meningitis (an infection in the brain) in any medical textbook, you find a set of uncompromising rules on how to achieve a desired outcome: full recovery. You may have to conduct this or that test, perform this or that imaging procedure, and administer a variety of antibiotics and supportive therapies. All well and good! In Palestine, however, physicians have had to dance to their own beat as they practiced the art of medicine under occupation.

In Palestine, a patient may not be able to reach a physician because of a curfew or a blockade. A CT scan may not be performed because the scanner is missing a replacement part that is stuck at a crossing or an Israeli checkpoint. Antibiotics may be in short supply or may have expired during the lengthy distribution process for donated supplies. You have all heard of the pregnant women who give birth at checkpoints and at times lose their lives while doing so. You've also heard of the child who needed a surgical intervention but couldn't be transferred to the proper facility because of a logistical delay – also known as *tanseeq* falling through.

For all these and many other reasons, physicians who practice medicine in Palestine find themselves faced with challenges that boggle the mind. Yet

they have written their own medical rules. In fact, they have taken those bitter lemons and made some sweet, sweet lemonade! Don't get me wrong, I am by no means minimising the suffering that our elders, fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, and children have had to endure under this ugly occupation, but I can't help admitting that nothing has taught me more resilience, ingenuity, and appreciation of life than my physician colleagues and patients in Palestine.

The institutions of medicine in Palestine – from clinics in private residences to large teaching hospitals, from local health departments to national ministries, from public institutions to non-governmental entities – have managed to flourish despite the deliberate efforts by the occupation to derail any attempt at progress. Some have inexplicably persisted in spite

of having to operate under difficult budgetary constraints that ebb and flow with the political mood of the season.

Given the opportunity to step back and catch a breath, Palestinian physicians are resourceful, intelligent, and altruistic. Nothing better exemplifies this than the surgeon from Hebron who travels to Nablus to operate on a few patients who need his expertise, and who – while there – teaches physician trainees and medical students a thing or two before he heads back home. All this while using the back roads to avoid being caught at an Israeli checkpoint without the “right” papers and getting “deported” east of the river! Or the paediatrician who is there for her patients night and day when needed and yet, fuelled by a deep sense of obligation, finds the time to teach public health at a university and pursue her research on diabetes, anaemia, and other not-so-obvious killers in our midst.

These are but a few of my Palestinian physician/scientist heroes. They see and treat their patients, educate and train future doctors, nurses, and healthcare workers, stay up to date on what’s new in their fields of specialty, and still find the time to advance medical research to the betterment of our people. They are practical experts at multi-tasking.

I point out these shining examples of pure goodness so as not to take them for granted. Especially because they too frequently and easily are overshadowed by what has gone wrong. We have no illusions of perfection! We have lived and witnessed corruption, ignorance, ideological nepotism, and mismanagement with costly consequences at all levels. We have

all encountered those “bad apples” amongst us. And although one can justifiably be discouraged by the misdeeds and shortcomings of the few, it behoves us to always look at the bigger picture and work tirelessly, in whatever way we can, to contribute to the solution rather than to the problems.

Even though scientific research is its own best reward, scientists need encouragement, nurturing, and support from public and private networks and, more importantly, from their families, their neighbours, their colleagues, and their fellow Palestinians. Yes, from you! Their success is our success...

All resources of our Palestinian collective, wherever they may be, ought to be utilised to ensure that the next generation of Palestinian healthcare workers experiences sound scientific upbringing that promotes inquisitive thinking and boundless imagination.

We may not have the latest or greatest medical technology or machines; we may still be writing our own rules for practicing medicine, but we will always have the greatest ingredients for scientific success: smart, persistent, and resilient Palestinians. As Mahmoud Darwish so elegantly summed it up: “Upon this land there is that which makes life worth living.”

*Dr. Nizar Maraqa is a practicing Palestinian physician who teaches paediatric infectious diseases at the University of Florida. He is a proud member of the Palestinian Pediatric Society and has previously worked as a consultant paediatrician at Ramallah Governmental Hospital, where he had the opportunity to learn from his patients, medical students, and paediatric residents.*

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\* <http://www.globalresearch.ca/palestinian-health-care-conditions-under-occupation/2243>.