



The St John Ophthalmic Association

Asia Pacific ~ Americas ~ Europe ~ Africa ~ Middle East

Partners in Expertise

25th August 2019

A report on the Activities of the St John Ophthalmic Association 2017 - 2019

It is with the most sincere thanks - to all our supporters - that the SOA has been able to offer postgraduate encouragement and opportunities to our staff, and to enable healthcare professionals from abroad to see first-hand the remarkable work of St John Eye Hospital Group.

As for all charitable providers of healthcare in the Middle East, and particularly in Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza, these past few years have proved challenging. St John Eye Hospital Group (SJEHG) is the largest provider of ophthalmic care in the region, and is supported by charitable income and, where it can be afforded, patient income. Outpatient and surgical demand rise year on year, and financial pressures are always at our doorstep.

In this report, the support of all our donors is gratefully acknowledged. This assistance strengthens our academic base, elevates the quality of postgraduate medicine that can be provided, and encourages collaboration between professionals. The SOA is run *pro bono* by healthcare professionals, and all donations go directly towards these ends.

With enormous thanks, on behalf of the SOA,

David H Verity, OStJ MD MA FRCOphth
Consultant Ophthalmic Surgeon, Moorfields Eye Hospital, London.

Chair, St John Ophthalmic Association
Trustee, St John Eye Hospital Group
Hospitaller, Order of St John

Introduction

The service needs of SJEHG are significant. These needs can only be met by the skilled nurses, doctors and other healthcare professionals employed by St John across the Group's units in Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza. Their ability to deliver sight-saving care is a reflection of their pre and post-graduate training, and on-going support in the wider regional and international ophthalmic world.

The SOA was established in 2015 to support the healthcare professionals in St John, and to create a more structured international base of professionals and donors focussed on the

postgraduate work of the Eye Hospital Group (see appendix 1 below). Thus, the Association is a relatively new venture, and our updated activity can be seen on www.SOA.global. We are now formed of branches across Europe (2016), Asia Pacific (2017), the Americas (2018), and Africa (2018). The reason for this broad base is that the Priors of St John exist across these regions, and are home to many doctors and nurses who support the Eye Hospital Group.

(1) Medical and Nursing exchanges between Jerusalem and London.

Firstly, in November 2017 we sponsored the visit of Dr Habes Batta to Moorfields Eye Hospital, London. Dr Batta is a paediatric specialist, and he met his counterparts in London. One of the most pressing concerns in the population he serves is retinopathy of prematurity, which frequently causes sight-loss in the premature infants. Much of his visit was spent discussing strategies for dealing with this problem. His report is given in Appendix 2.

Secondly, in June 2018, we were able to sponsor a similar visit of Dr Erekat, a colleague training in the area of inflammatory and infective diseases of the eye, which affect all ages, and similarly are frequently blinding unless treated early, and with modern drugs. She attended Moorfield's annual course on the subject, with reduced course fees, and her accommodation covered by the SOA. Her report is given in Appendix 2 below.

(2) Congress with regional colleagues

Our donors' support also enabled six of our St John doctors to attend the centenary scientific congress of the Hadassah ophthalmology department in 2018. Despite the political challenges of the region, we work with all regional colleagues to improve the healthcare we can offer our patients. We were particularly pleased to support this initiative, and our international research output now flourishes, with several SOA-supported publications in recent years.

(3) Exchanges between Europe and Jerusalem

In September 2018 the SOA arranged a visit of key professionals and supporters to Jerusalem to learn more of the work of the Eye Hospital Group. A brief note on this is given on the website. <https://www.soa.global/soa-chapters/soa-global/soa-global-2018-cultural-and-historical-summit/>

Among this group, the SOA was able to sponsor five young professionals and two ophthalmic professors. These included a medical student, a pre-med student, an undergraduate in modern languages (who is returning to the region in 2019), an ophthalmic trainee at Moorfields, and two senior ophthalmic surgeons. In each case, as a result of this introduction, the individuals concerned are continuing their support for St John.. Their reports are included in Appendix 3 below.

Finally, in 2020 we shall be supporting St John's artificial eye (prosthetic) service with a visit from one of the prosthetists in Moorfields Eye Hospital. Sadly, with a high rate of injury in this population, there is constant demand for well-made artificial eyes. As per other visits, sponsorship will cost in the region of £500 - £600. There are residual funds from the award which should cover both this, and one further visit of a doctor or nurse from Jerusalem.

In summary, I hope this report shows that the SOA is working hard alongside our supporters to improve the delivery and provision of postgraduate medicine in the region. Funding permitting, we shall continue to sponsor the on-going need for doctors and nurses to visit the UK, and experts to teach and train in Jerusalem and Gaza.

Appendix 1:

The specific objectives of the St John Ophthalmic Association

- To coordinate international healthcare support and expertise for St John
- To increase training opportunities for St John staff, both regionally and internationally
- To organise periodic regional and international meetings to advance teaching and research at St John
- To cooperate with regional and international sister organisations and universities in the development of research and on-line ophthalmology teaching capability.

Appendix 2

Short reports: Colleagues visiting the UK from Jerusalem

1. **Visit of Dr Habes Batta, MD - SJEHG Consultant Paediatric Surgeon**
2. **Visit of Dr Salam Erekat - SJEHG Uveitis expert**

(1) Visit of Dr Habes Batta, MD

SJEHG Consultant Paediatric Surgeon

To London, 17th -24th November 2017

In 2017 Dr Habes Batta was the first doctor to be sponsored by the SOA to visit doctors in the UK.



Being a consultant ophthalmic paediatric surgeon at SJEHG, and the medical lead, he spent time both in oculoplastics and then paediatric clinics and theatres, the latter hosted by Miss Sarah Hull and Miss Gill Adams. He observed numerous paediatric clinics and surgeries, including complex squint cases, and also joined colleagues in both St George's hospital, and the Homerton hospital, to screen premature infants for ROP (retinopathy of prematurity).

ROP is, sadly, prevalent in the Palestinian population, and requires considerable experience both in diagnosis and in management. Failure to diagnose the condition early enough, and to

treat it, can have life-long consequences for the child. Dr Batta found this element of his attachment particularly beneficial, and much discussion was centered on the current technology in terms of photographic screening technology (RetCam3®) and how funding for such equipment might be obtained.

Such technology, mainstream in western Europe, brings major benefits in terms of earlier and more accurate diagnosis (preventing blindness), more accurate record keeping, reduced medical time on the wards, and better research opportunities for SJEHG. Since the retinal images could be readily be interpreted in London, thus providing any necessary initial training in their interpretation, the question of establishing a working partnership with Moorfields was explored.

Finally, Dr Batta had the opportunity to work with Miss Melanie Hingoranie in the paediatric casualty department, and Miss Jo Hancox in the squint clinic

In his busy week, Dr Batta met a great number of surgeons, including Miss Alison Davis, Mr David Verity, and many others at the annual Moorfields Consultants' dinner. He had a brief opportunity to visit parts of London, including the Natural History Museum, Drapers Hall, and, via a (chilly) open top boat ride, the Tower of London.

The SOA looks forward to providing continued support for Dr Batta and his vital and complex work as a paediatric surgeon in Jerusalem, The West Bank, and Gaza.

(2) Visit of Dr Salam Erekat

SJEHG Uveitis expert

Report: Visit to London, June 2018



Dr Salam Erekat was born in Jerusalem, and lives in Jericho. She completed her MD at the University of Jordan in 2006, and joined St John Eye Hospital as a resident in 2008. Following her residency program she undertook a one year fellowship in inflammatory eye disease (uveitis) at Hadassah Hospital in 2012.

In 2013, upon completion of her fellowship, she was instrumental in establishing the uveitis department at St John Eye Hospital. In 2017 she undertook a further fellowship in uveitis, retina and retinal OCT imaging at Tel Aviv medical centre, completing this in May 2018.

Dr Erekat has been at St John Eye Hospital for over ten years, is currently at sub-specialist grade, leads the uveitis service, and is an active member of SOA-Middle East.

In June 2018, the SOA was pleased to sponsor Dr Erekat's visit to London's Moorfields Eye Hospital, where she participated in a course on diagnosing and managing all forms of intraocular inflammations and infections. The course, lead by senior UK ophthalmologists, included attending lectures and clinics, and examining patients.

Dr Erekat found this experience highly instructive, and has advanced her knowledge in the field. Inflammatory and infective disease is common in the Palestinian population, and her expertise provides much-needed relief to the patients of St John.

The SOA looks forward to providing continued support for Dr Erekat and other doctors and nurses from St John in the future.

Appendix 3

Short reports: Colleagues visiting Jerusalem from Europe

1. Mr Theo Pettit, Medical Student, Imperial College, London.
2. Mr Julius Geerling, Medical Student, Germany and his father Prof. Gerd Geering
3. Miss Guilia da Cruz, undergraduate (languages / international studies) and her father Prof. Lyndon da Cruz.
4. Mr Nizar Din, Specialist Registrar, Moorfields Eye Hospital, London. Short Report (3)

(1) Mr Theo Pettit

Medical Student, Imperial College, London
Visit to St. John Eye Hospital
4th - 9th September 2018

My arrival at the St. John Eye Hospital was a welcome one. The Hospital staff met me with a broad smile, and tremendous hospitality – the first indication how much supporters are valued by the charity. Having received a brief lecture on the history of the Order up to the present day, including its core beliefs and the people who paved the way to its success, it became clear that in the last 70 years St. John has become a beacon of hope, providing care to a population in a war-torn, deprived area of the world.

As a visiting Medical Student, I enjoyed meeting so many other medical supporters, including family friend Dr David Verity, Dr Bob Kersten, Dr Dan Briscoe, Professor Richard Collin and many others. Through their strong ties with the family of St John, they are working to bring ophthalmology and the work of St John both to myself and other medical students who visit the Hospital Group.



I was fortunate to attend theatres with Doctor Dan Briscoe, an oculoplastic surgeon, and observe the treatment of a Gazan lady who had previously lost an eye from trauma, and was suffering the effects of a hollow eye socket (post enucleation socket syndrome). The surgery took into account function, and the aesthetic and the religious beliefs of the patient, which was a delicate balance, and a massive privilege to watch. He removed temporal fascia from the side of the head to wrap an orbital implant, instead of thigh tissue, as it both obviates a limp after surgery, and takes into account the patient's religious wishes to keep her legs covered. The temporal fascia was sutured around a silicone implant, which was then implanted into the hollow (enucleated) orbit. He explained how this would improve the symmetry of the patient's face, and prevent both rejection and infection of the implant, as it was covered with the patient's own tissues. The nurses allowed me to visit the patient after surgery, and although there was a language barrier between us, it was clear that she was grateful.

Later, in the day-case theatre, I spent time with a resident surgeon and corneal specialist Doctor Iyad. Cataract surgery is unlike oculoplastic surgery, carried out entirely under a microscope and displayed to the observers on two large screens. He described the procedure step by step, and with great patience, making his patients, the other medical students and myself feel relaxed in a friendly environment. In the space of about two hours he had restored sight to a list of patients, who had arrived with hazy vision, but could now see again. In all the theatres I observed in, the technology, equipment and staff worked efficiently and professionally, taking a short break mid-morning. The table was laid for a late breakfast by the ever-helpful catering staff, and the doctors and nurses discussed their surgical cases, sharing their experiences and thoughts with all the theatre staff. It is worth remembering that all the equipment and treatment at St John is made available by funds raised by the Order, its trustees and supporters, put efficiently towards a most needed and worthy cause.

Perhaps the greatest privilege for me personally was joining the Outreach team and helping them filing notes and testing vision in the clinic in the West Bank. The team was formed of two doctors, three nurses, a driver and two helpers (myself included on this occasion). The team travels every day of the year to a different town in the West Bank region, offering free and vital eye testing to the underprivileged in the area. In clinic, I was able to observe the eye examinations via a teaching lens fixed to the slit lamp, and observed many different diseases, including cataracts, retinal detachments and glaucoma. These patients would then be referred to St John's satellite hospitals within the West Bank, or to the hospital in Jerusalem. Similar to the surgical team, the Outreach team were very accommodating, and the knowledge I acquired from that one morning was invaluable. One girl aged 19 scored very poorly on her visual acuity tests in both eyes due to refractive error (short-sightedness), and prior to her attending the clinic she said she was "embarrassed" at school, being unable to read the blackboard. With the help of St. John's Outreach team and the right pair of glasses, this girl will now be able to study normally, and with her improved eyesight will be able to live a more prosperous life.

From my time spent in Jerusalem and the West Bank, with patients, doctors, fundraisers and the rest of the St. John family, the lessons I learnt were invaluable. I saw first-hand the struggle the people face on a day to day basis, and how possible it is to restore the gift of sight, and thereby improve lives.

This experience has encouraged me to engage in charitable events, and raise money for this truly worthy cause. Pilgrims travel from lands far away to see the holy sites in the Old City. But from my time in this beautiful but troubled country, its beauty lies within the walls of the St John Eye Hospital, and the smile of her patients.

(2) Professor Gerd Geerling, MD

Head of the Universitäts-Augenklinik Düsseldorf of the University of Düsseldorf, Germany
And his son and **Julius Geerling**, Premedical Student, Germany

Visit to St. John Eye Hospital
4th - 9th September 2018

My 18 year old son Julius and I visited St. John's eye hospital in Jerusalem in September 2018.

While I had long been looking forward to this first-time visit, I was thrilled to learn how professionally and dedicated medical care and its management are being executed under the difficult situation of this hot spot of diverse religious and political interests.



This is first class medicine being delivered in third world-like environment with a moral and spirit second to none.

I was particularly impressed by the new scientific laboratory that has been set up to study blinding genetic eye diseases. There is little I feel is needed other than moral and financial support so that St. John's staff can continue with their excellent work.

Professor Gerd Geerling, MD

Report from Julius Geerling

"I was greeted with open arms as I arrived in a world completely foreign to me and immediately experienced the hospitable and caring mentality that St. John Eye Hospital is built upon. After talking to some of the patients I realized what being treated at this modern facility truly means to those in need. Some travelled hundreds of miles to be treated and could only rely on the charitable work of the many 'Good Samaritans' on site, and thousands of Supporters across the world.

Through this collaboration, I was even able to get to know some other future medical students which led to several discussions about the latest political developments and created a sense of community, which I believe is the basis for all the work done at St. John in order to help the less fortunate."

Julius hopes to come back as a medical student volunteer and I hope that he and his generation will be able to carry St. John's flag into a more peaceful and healthy future.

Julius Geerling

(3) Miss Giulia da Cruz, and her father Prof. Lyndon da Cruz

Introduction



Prof Lyndon da Cruz is Professor of Retinal Stem Cell and Transplantation Surgery in University College London (UCL).

He is also a Consultant Retinal Surgeon at Moorfields Eye Hospital, London, and head of his department.

Early in 2018 he visited Gaza where he taught and performed retinal surgery at St John's new hospital. *

He is the first such surgeon from London to undertake such a working visit.

In September 2018, Prof da Cruz returned to Jerusalem with his daughter, Giulia, who is an undergraduate studying languages. They visited the eye clinic of St John in the Old City of Jerusalem, and spent a day in St John's flagship hospital in East Jerusalem learning of its work, and seeing theatres and clinic in action.

Report from Giulia da Cruz

I have heard about the Holy-Land and the Palestine – Israel conflict for as long as I remember. It seemed a long way away, though I have always been drawn to Jerusalem for its cultural and religious significance and, as it seemed such a special place. The whole region has interested me always so much so that I have decided to study Arabic at University and recently completed my first term there.

In the last couple years, I was made aware of St John's as my father went to Jerusalem and Gaza, to work at the St John's Eye hospitals. This year, however, when the opportunity for my dad to visit Jerusalem and the eye hospital came, I was more than happy to accompany him.



The experience of seeing the city of Jerusalem, the St John's Hospital and all of the incredible things done by the doctors, nurses and carers was really unbelievable. It was inspiring to see how friendly and welcoming the hospital was to all who came and how well it was run despite all of the difficulties that the region presents. The most exciting day was



(centre)

spent in the operating theatre seeing the way it ran and watching some operations. I felt that I would very much like to go back in the future and spend more time visiting the outreach sites in the West Bank and working in the hospital for a longer period. I would love to be part of the ongoing work that St John's does and when my Arabic is more fluent, I feel that I will be able to offer much more.

Giulia da Cruz

Report from Lyndon da Cruz

I have been inspired by the work that the St John's Eye Hospital Group does in Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza from hearing reports from the many Eye Surgeons and nurses from London who have been over the years. When the opportunity came to go and work there, I had no hesitation to accept.

What I saw was even more impressive than I had expected. I was especially amazed to see the quality and efficiency of the hospital and vitreo-retinal surgery work being carried out in Gaza under such restricting conditions.* That the St John's group was able to build such a high-quality hospital confirmed their commitment to excellence and that it functioned so well was a tribute to the resilience and commitment of the people in Gaza. It was very clear that they were proud of the hospital and that it acted as a point of reference for the city and a reassurance that there was an international group who was concerned for their health and welfare.

The Hospital in East Jerusalem was equally impressive and the open and welcoming nature of the people working there was very inspiring. I found that the surgeons working in retinal surgery, which is my specialty, were excellently trained – in India and Russia, and that their quality of work was very high. They need interaction with other surgeons as their travel is restricted and I felt that arriving to spend time operating with them contributed to their work and development as surgeons.

I look forward to going back and working for longer periods of time in both Jerusalem and Gaza and also look forward to welcoming the surgeons in London if the circumstances allow.

Prof. Lyndon da Cruz

* Eye Hospital of St John in Gaza: <https://www.stjohnehospital.org/our-impact/gaza-hospital-modk>

(4) Mr Nizar Din, MBBS AICSM BSc FRCOphth
Specialist Registrar, Moorfields Eye Hospital, London
September 2018, Jerusalem



Jerusalem with its rich history and significance to all the Abrahamic religions, has always conjured up mystery, magic and intrigue. Having heard positive feedback from my colleagues in London, I was very excited to be offered the chance to visit the St John's Eye Hospital.

Upon arrival at the hospital, I was immediately struck by the impressive world class facilities and equipment on offer. There was a great sense of professionalism, quality and focus by the staff to strive to emulate excellence. Listening to the opening talks, the grand vision of providing eye care across Jerusalem and beyond for those in need regardless of religious denomination, ethnicity or ability to pay was the cornerstone mission.

The expansion of the new state of the art Gaza Hospital is providing critical eye care in one of the most dangerous and inaccessible places in the world, seeing over 27,000 patients and having operated on 500 patients.

The mobile outreach programmes run by dedicated staff, aim to reach the most vulnerable and isolated areas in the West Bank region and beyond.

Furthermore, the research unit is making significant strides and achieving international recognition at various conferences, utilising its bank of patients and collaboration with leading global institutions.

In a country where war and toil has for centuries been the underlying way of life, the St John Eye Hospital Group provides a shining example of the good that can occur when you marry humanitarian values, dedication and hope.

“Victory is changing the hearts of your opponents by gentleness and kindness”
Salahuddin Al-Ayyubi.

Mr Din is returning to St John in 2019/20 to support the next generation of doctors and their development.