

# A Center for Women's Health in Palestine

One year ago the first center in Palestine for the specific diagnosis of breast cancer was opened in Bethlehem. Its history is an example of how a spirit of service can cross over borders and reach the world's peripheries.

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On December 9, 2018, the first Breast Unit was opened in the public

hospital of Beit Jala near Bethlehem. The project is the joint effort of the ELIS center in Rome's Tiburtino neighborhood, the Campus Bio-Medico University of Rome, and the Italian Agency for Cooperation in Development.

Among cancer patients in Palestine, almost 17% suffer from breast cancer specifically. You don't need to be a cancer expert to know that early diagnosis often makes a life or death difference. But up until a year ago, there was no health center in Palestine offering breast cancer diagnoses, which meant that women had to travel to other countries for basic preventive care, something not everyone can afford to do.

This project, which includes periods of training and exchange between Italian and Palestinian doctors, has been closely followed by Palestine's Ministry of Health. Government

official Jawad Awwad explains: “This Breast Care Unit represents an exchange of learning between doctors, specialists, and radiology technicians from two nations: Italy and Palestine. Thanks to this relationship, for the first time in Palestine, we have been able to introduce new methods that have given exceptional results, demonstrating the importance of communication and sharing beyond cultural differences. Here in Palestine, we now have the honor of offering the population a service comparable to Italian and European standards.”

In addition to providing breast cancer diagnoses, the center also helps raise awareness about the disease, an essential step towards helping women detect it early on. Up until now, the lack of knowledge about the cancer combined with the complexity of its treatment generally

led women to hide their symptoms out of fear.

“If you receive an early diagnosis, it is much better for your life, for your family, and for your country,” says Dr. Nafez, director of the new center.

Another doctor at the center, Dr. Gladeer, dedicates a great portion of his time to spreading the news around the area, notifying other health centers to let women know they can be tested at Beit Jala using a reliable method.

Although it officially opened in December, the Breast Care Unit has been functioning for more than a year, with over a thousand women receiving treatment.

Ghada, 43 years old, was recently treated in Beit Jala and was very satisfied with her experience. She said she worried because breast cancer runs in her family and, up

until now, they have had to travel to Jordan for treatment. But as soon as she came into contact with the personnel at Beit Jala, her worries disappeared.

“I felt that I was very well taken care of,” says Ghada.

## **Development across borders**

It was the ELIS center that played a crucial role in making the connection between the two hospitals.

“ELIS has been involved in international cooperation for over thirty years now,” says Daniele Maturo, Vice President of the ELIS Center Association. “Our DNA is marked by the desire to commit ourselves to bringing hope wherever there is suffering.”

“We started in Tiburtino, a poor neighborhood on Rome's periphery, but our mission also spurs us to look

beyond Italy to the whole world, whatever the religion and culture of the people involved. As Saint Josemaría, who inspired and continues inspiring our work, said: *There is but one race, the race of the children of God!*"

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