

BETHLEHEM

At this oasis, no expectant mother is turned away

Catholic-run hospital provides high-tech maternity care for at-risk pregnancies regardless of religion or ability to pay

By Judith Sudilovsky

Nearing the end of her seventh pregnancy, Nawal El Basset Fanon, 33, makes a weekly journey from her West Bank village of Nahalin to Holy Family Maternity Hospital for a checkup on her baby.

Sometimes the trip to Bethlehem, about 20 miles from Nahalin, is simple and can be made in under 20 minutes with one taxi. However, if there are Israeli-imposed road closures and checkpoints, it can take much longer and several taxi changes before reaching the hospital.

Because of her previous history—her sixth child died from respiratory problems four days after she gave birth to him at another hospital—and the large size of this baby, she is considered a high-risk pregnancy.

Knowing this, Fanon wanted have her baby at the Catholic-run Holy Family Hospital. Though there are other maternity wards and small private clinics in the area, Holy Family Hospital, with its modern technology, including the only neonatal intensive-care unit in the district, is the only maternity hospital able to deal with high-risk cases.

The hospital now delivers 60 percent of all babies born in Bethlehem, according to Dr. Robert Tabash, director of hospital administration. Almost all high-risk cases in the area come to Holy Family Hospital.

Because of the high fertility rate locally, with some mothers delivering up to 10 babies or more, their chances of complications during delivery is increased, and so the availability of emergency and high-risk medical care is greatly needed, he noted.

Catholic presence

Holy Family Hospital has been operated and funded by the Sovereign Order of Malta since 1989, when it was converted from a 100-year-old general hospital run by the French Sisters of Charity into a maternity hospital. The Order of Malta, whose members are referred to as knights

and dames, was founded in 1050 in Jerusalem. The group of mostly lay members works in the field of medical and social care and humanitarian aid in more than 120 countries.

Without the help of the Order of Malta, the hospital would not be able to accomplish much of the work. There is no national health insurance in the Palestinian Territories, Tabash said, and because of the high unemployment rate it is difficult for many of the patients to pay even the approximate \$100 fee the hospital charges per delivery.

However, it is the hospital's policy to treat every patient who arrives equally and no woman is turned away, or denied treatment, he said.

"Part of our mission is that we are caring for the poor. Some people can pay and they do, but many cannot. We want these to be treated in a manner equivalent to anything in the Western world. We want them to get the best," Tabash said.

As a Catholic hospital, the staff treat anyone regardless of nationality, religion, race or economics, he said.

"In spite of the exodus of many Palestinian Christians, we, as Knights of Malta, have to testify our faith and to help the poor people," said Hospital Director Dr. Jacques Keutgen.

Only about 33 percent of the hospital's annual \$2.3 million budget is covered by patient fees. The balance is covered through donations from the Order of Malta. Though they are recipients of one-time grants such as a recent \$3.5 million grant from USAID and \$800,000 from the Belgian government, it is the everyday operating costs of the hospital that are difficult to meet, Tabash said. The hospital has established a foundation in the United States to help raise funds.

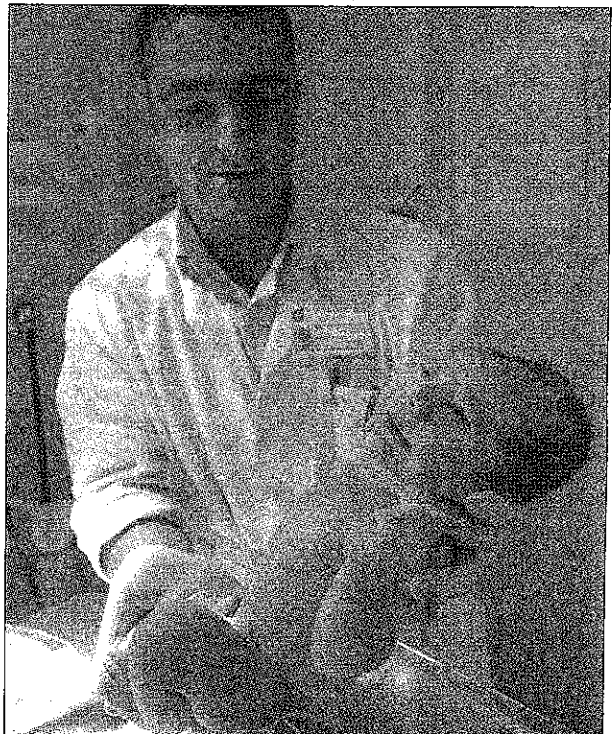
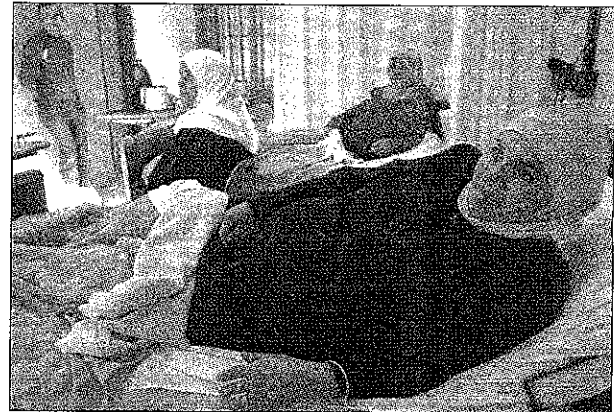
New growth

With the new grants they will build a second-floor addition to the hospital to expand their labor ward and neonatal intensive-care unit. An emergency Caesarean-section operating room and two operating rooms for other non-emergency gynecological procedures are also planned. They will also begin operating a two-room emergency room linked to the new floor by an elevator and a staircase. The new renovations will expand the hospital's patient



TOP: Ibtisam Atrash sits between her premature 6-day-old twin sons in the intensive care unit of the Holy Family Maternity Hospital in December. **CENTER:** Nawal Abde-Baset Najajreh, 8 months pregnant, rests in a room in the hospital after experiencing some complications during her pregnancy. **BOTTOM:** Dr. Ibrahim Abu Zahira examines a newborn baby in the neonatal delivery room of the hospital.

PHOTOS BY DEBBIE HILL



capacity from 47 to 60.

They will also be opening a well-women clinic at the hospital and expanding their outreach program. Already the hospital has a mobile clinic that reaches out to Bedouin women in remote areas in the surrounding desert region once a week.

It's all rewarding work, they say.

"To watch a new life coming into this world daily right in front of your eyes, between your hands, is very precious for me as a mother ... and a midwife, even though we don't know what the future will be for [the babies]," said Hanan Bannourah, midwifery supervisor at the hospital. "It gives me pride as a woman to support [the women] in their most dangerous, painful and beautiful experience."

Judith Sudilovsky writes from Jerusalem. To learn more about Holy Family Hospital, visit www.hfffoundation.org.