



The King Hussein Cancer Center

Established by Royal Decree in 1997, KHCC has evolved into the leading cancer hospital in the Middle East, with state-of-the-art facilities providing life-saving treatment to over 4,000 patients every year, many of them children.



PHOTO: KHCF



HRH Princess Ghida Talal (left) and HRH Princess Dina Mired (right) are tireless advocates for excellence in cancer care in Jordan.

A Royal mission – fighting cancer in Jordan and the Middle East

BY AUDREY HAYLINS

The name is not all that is royal about Jordan's King Hussein Cancer Foundation (KHCF). Leading the dedicated team of medics, support staff and fundraisers are two royal princesses – **Princess Ghida Talal**, Chairperson of the Board of Trustees, and **Princess Dina Mired**, Director-General. Unlike some royal patrons, however, the princesses are more than just figureheads, as the *OFID Quarterly* discovered during a recent interview with Their Highnesses.

Together, they make a formidable duo. Utterly committed to their cause, the Princesses Ghida and Dina are powerful protagonists in Jordan's fight against cancer – the country's second biggest killer after heart disease. Behind their steely determination lies a special understanding borne out of their own first-hand experiences. As a young bride, Princess Ghida helped her husband successfully battle Non-Hodgkins Lymphoma, while Princess Dina has nursed her young son through leukemia.

"We have both lived cancer in all its facets – from the terror to the taboo. We understand all the steps that go with it,

because we've actually been there. It is this that gives our passion an extra edge," explains Princess Ghida.

And it is the princesses' passion that has helped establish KHCF's medical arm, the King Hussein Cancer Center, as the leading hospital of its kind in the Middle East.

Established by Royal Decree in 1997, the Center has evolved into a comprehensive, state-of-the-art facility that is the equal of anything anywhere in the world. Testament to its standing is its accreditation as a "disease-specific" healthcare provider by the internationally-recognized *Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations* (JCAHO).

"We were the first cancer hospital outside the United States to receive this exceptional distinction from JCAHO, so it's something we are very proud of," says Princess Ghida. The Center has also recently been awarded membership of the prestigious College of American Pathologists.

In order to augment KHCC's pool of expertise and experience, the princesses and their team have labored hard to forge affiliations with some of the top cancer centers in the world, among them the USA National Cancer Institute, St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, USA; and Georgetown University Lombardi Cancer Center, USA. Ties are likewise being nur-

Surviving breast cancer: Sahar's story

Sahar Mifleh Jarrar, 49, is an educated woman with a master's degree in social sciences and population studies. In 2004, while conducting an early detection test for breast cancer at the King Hussein Cancer Center, a lump in her left breast was discovered. Even before getting the results of her biopsy, she knew she had cancer. The tests confirmed her suspicions.

Sahar says: "Dr. Yasar Qutaiba, the head of the early detection clinic, explained to me that I would need a partial or full mastectomy and that the lymph nodes in my armpits would have to be examined to restrict the spread."

On her second visit, Sahar met with surgeon Dr. Mahmoud Al Masri, who informed her that she was in the early stages of the disease and so recommended a partial mastectomy. Sahar, however, insisted on a full mastectomy to guarantee a higher chance of recovery. "I disregarded the affect it may have on my psychology as a woman, due to the threat to my feminine appearance. I was completely convinced of the importance of giving priority to recovery."

Sahar underwent the operation and her left breast was removed. "The surgery was followed by four sessions of chemotherapy as a preventative measure, although the doctor insisted I did not need it. The chemotherapy was my choice, although post-op tests showed the lymph nodes in my armpits to be disease free; even the removed lump itself was small at a size of 1.5 cm."

Sahar's chemotherapy treatments were not easy. She recalls, "I could hardly endure the third session and during the fourth, I started to cry hysterically before any needles were put in. I still suffer from the negative effects of the chemotherapy, as I feel a weakness in my joints and an increase in my weight due to the hormone treatment. However,

exercise and volunteering with the 'Sanad Support Group' program helped me overcome such negative effects."

Sahar remains confident, saying: "In spite of the psychological, physical and social suffering I went through, the support of my husband, family and friends helped me to overcome my ordeal and recover. My 13-year-old daughter was my reason for enduring the disease and treatments and ultimately the reason for my survival. She used to say: 'Mom you have to live to see my children. I love you as you are, with or without a breast, with or without hair. The important thing is that you are still alive and that you are beside me, talking to me and holding me close.'"

Sahar speaks in glowing terms of the care she received at KHCC: "It is not an exaggeration to say that I received wonderful health and psychological care, from the reception staff to the medical team. Nor can I forget the social team which alleviated the burden of treatment among the patients. My volunteer work at the Sanad Support Group allowed me, in turn, to help others as well as offer psychological and moral support."

Today, Sahar has resumed living a normal life, playing all the roles required of her as a wife, mother and effective woman in society, without problem. She admits that battling cancer taught her the importance of love and loved ones in our lives through their continuous support in times of need.



tured with the University of Texas M. D. Anderson Cancer Center as well as the organization Susan G. Komen for the Cure, the USA's largest grassroots network of breast cancer survivors and activists.

Located in the Jordanian capital Amman, KHCC's 180-bed hospital boasts state-of-the-art medical equipment and services, including surgical and intensive care facilities, and treats over 4,000 new cancer patients every year, including children. Its first-class team of oncologists and other healthcare professionals is drawn from around the world, with the aim of providing the highest quality of care. Innovations include a tele-synergy unit, which allows for real time consultations on difficult cases between specialists in two or more countries, and a multi-modality clinic, where the patient is treated holistically by a chemotherapist, psychiatrist and neurologist.

According to Princess Ghida, the "real jewel" in KHCC's crown is its bone marrow transplant program. The Center conducts around 100 of these delicate, life-saving procedures every year, on both children and adults, with a very high success rate. "A bone marrow transplant is usually the last resort for a cancer patient, the only option left when the treatment is not working," explains the Princess, who is quick to emphasize the importance of the program: "As the only transplant service in Jordan and the most advanced in the region, our work in this area is invaluable."

Despite the remarkable success of the bone marrow transplant program, both royal princesses agree that the Center's most outstanding achievement lies in its leadership of Jordan's national breast cancer campaign. Launched about three years ago by the Ministry of Health, this initiative seeks to offer comprehensive services for the early detection and screening of breast cancer for all women aged between 40 and 59.

Until very recently, 70 percent of women diagnosed with breast cancer in Jordan were presenting at an advanced stage of the disease and were often be-



yond the chance of a cure. Today, thanks to a nationwide awareness campaign that has helped break down the taboos surrounding the "Big C," this statistic has been almost halved.

"It's amazing to see how in such a short time we have managed so emphatically to decrease mortality among Jordanian women, who were dying so unnecessarily," declares Princess Dina. "Now we are receiving women mostly with stage one and stage two cancers, and we are even seeing the emergence of a stage zero, where only minimal intervention is needed to effect a cure."

Advances in treatment notwithstanding, like every other cancer hospital KHCC is witnessing a steady rise in patient numbers, which are growing at the rate of about 1,000 per year. Princess Ghida believes that the rise is due to a number of factors, including a general increase in cancer rates, higher awareness, screening campaigns and early detection, as well as fewer taboos.

The number of outpatient visits, meanwhile, has multiplied 10-fold in just six years. This, assures Princess Dina, is a positive development: "The whole ►

Two young cancer survivors unveil the "King Hussein Wall of Hope," which raised US\$820,000 in funding for the hospital. Each brick in the wall represents a donation and is engraved with the name of the donor or loved-one.



◀ movement worldwide for cancer is to go for outpatient treatment, which is far better for the individual than spending a lot of time in hospital.” KHCC fully supports this idea and has introduced the use of portable “CADD” pumps that enable chemotherapy to be administered safely and effectively in an outpatient setting so that patients are able to continue living their lives as normally as possible. “With

the CADD pump, people can have their chemo at home and even continuing working if they feel well enough,” says Princess Dina. “This allows us to treat more patients every month.”

As a non-profit NGO, the Foundation relies almost exclusively on fundraising to finance its day-to-day operations. Patients with the means to do so pay for their treatment. But the hospital’s policy

HRH Princess Ghida Talal, Chairperson of the Board of Trustees of KHCF and OFID Director-General, Mr. Suleiman J. Al-Herbish, conclude the grant agreement.



PHOTO: AGNES NEBHAY



Equipped with cutting-edge technology and a first-class medical staff, KHCC boasts a clutch of international accreditations for its work.

is to open its doors as much as possible to everyone in need. As Princess Ghida points out: “Cancer does not differentiate between rich and poor.” A full course of treatment, she estimates, can cost from US\$40,000 to US\$50,000.

Low-income Jordanians have their treatment subsidized by the Royal Court or the government. For patients who come from other Middle Eastern countries, most notably Palestine where health services are very basic, the Foundation has what is known as a Goodwill Fund, from which treatment, travel and accommodation can be financed. A separate, special fund for Iraqi citizens has so far raised over US\$2 million, mostly from wealthy compatriots.

“To be honest, funding is a huge burden,” Princess Ghida admits. “Our pockets are not bottomless, so we are heavily dependent upon donations.” Financial support for KHCF comes from a wide variety of sources, including philanthropists, private companies, foreign governments and national, regional or international agencies, such as OFID.

OFID’s partnership with KHCF began in 2006 with the donation of US\$400,000 towards the purchase of a digital mammography machine, which has been key in promoting early diagno-

sis. “This is hi-tech digital mammography,” explains Princess Dina. “It is incredibly precise and allows for much greater detection. Best of all, it has something known as a *Mammotome* system, which enables doctors to perform breast biopsies as an outpatient procedure.”

OFID’s latest contribution, a grant of US\$600,000, will co-finance a new state-of-the-art interventional radiology suite with special high-resolution imaging capabilities to improve accuracy and efficiency and, in many cases, eliminate the need for surgery for routine procedures. Princess Ghida explains:

“With cancer, you normally have to target all the cells, the good ones and the bad ones, but of course we strive constantly to harm as few healthy cells as possible and focus on the malignant ones. The images produced by this machine are so detailed they can provide us with a road map to do exactly that. So, for example, we can see where exactly to insert a radioactive pellet for the treatment of prostate cancer, or a Hickman Line for the delivery of chemotherapy, and all without a general anesthetic and the attendant side-effects. The benefits for the patients are incalculable.”

If all goes according to plan, the new radiology suite will be up and running by

the end of 2010, marking another step in KHCC’s journey to consolidate itself as one of the world’s leading cancer centers. In the meantime, the Princesses Ghida and Dina have another royal battle on their hands – how to raise the US\$100 million needed to realize their expansion plans for the hospital.

“There is so much more we need to do,” says Princess Dina. “We’ve never really believed in fancy buildings or big spaces, but we are so overstretched that we simply have to build a bigger hospital. We’ve already established the institutional capacity – the substance that makes a good hospital truly great – we just need to be able to accommodate more patients.” She adds that the plans have already been drawn up and include an expansion to the bone marrow transplant unit and an entire floor dedicated to breast cancer.

Big dreams they may be, but given the princesses’ tireless passion and determination, one thing can be guaranteed: they will not remain dreams for long. ■