

Israeli doctor talks about mission in Japan

By LAURA FIXMAN, Special to The CJN

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TORONTO — The speakers at the second annual DARA (Doctors Against Racism and Anti-Semitism) medical conference gathered in Toronto on Sunday to share their experiences helping people in war-torn and environmental disaster zones.

The medical conference, held at the University of Toronto titled “Disaster Medicine and Humanitarian Missions: Lessons Learned from International Experience,” included addresses from Dr. Bernie Goldman, chair of Save a Child’s Heart Canada; Major Vivian McAlister, a professor in the department of surgery in the Canadian Forces; and Dr. Ofer Merin, Shaare Zedek Medical Center’s deputy director-general.

Merin, who is currently in the northern Japanese town of Kurihara with a medical team that includes 19 physicians and nurses from the Israel Defence Forces, joined the conference via video.

DARA, a Toronto-based grassroots non-profit organization that aims to bring objectivity to medical journalism and academia, invited Merin to share his experience in aiding the victims of the March 8 earthquake and tsunami.

Operating out of a makeshift clinic in the village of Minamisanriku – which was completely destroyed by the tsunami and killed about half of the 17,000 residents – Merin has been posting messages on his blog, which he created to give people frequent updates about the mission.

“The people who survived are the refugees you read about on the news – completely homeless. These are the ones we came to assist,” Merin wrote in his first blog entry on March 29.

The Israeli clinic, led by the only foreign team on the ground, provides wards for pediatrics, surgery, maternity and gynecology, ophthalmology and intensive care, as well as a lab and pharmacy.

“Physicians from all around are coming with their patients for consults with our specialists, for blood tests and x-rays. Pregnant women are coming for ultrasounds as well, as this is a service they don’t have,” wrote Merin, who also updates his blog with videos and pictures.

One of the challenges facing the Israeli medical team is breaking through the cultural barriers and gaining the trust of the Japanese people.

At first, Merin said during the conference, the Japanese were hesitant to have foreigners treat them, but the Israeli team became increasingly popular after they treated the mayor of Minamisanriku.

“To be a foreigner and to work with Japan, this is the first time this has been done,” Merin said.

Despite their efforts, he said, the 30-person team can only treat about up to 30 patients a day. “It’s a drop in the ocean, what they did,” McAlister said.

But Merin chose to focus on the positive.

“This is what we can do, and we concentrate on that,” he said.

Radiation exposure is another obstacle the Israeli team has to overcome, and all patients and staff are tested daily. But Merin isn’t concerned about that.

“The amount of radiation here is way below the amount we know to be safe,” Merin said.

The clinic is located about 150 kilometres north of the Fukushima Daiichi power plant, which he attributes to the low levels of radiation.

Merin is no stranger when it comes to working under pressure in the midst of catastrophe.

Following the Jan. 12 earthquake that struck Haiti last year, Merin and his 230-member crew were one of the first to arrive in Haiti’s capital, working for 10 days straight to see more than 1,000 patients.

But the work he’s doing in Japan is “very different than the mission last year,” he said.

Last year in Haiti, Merin found it extremely difficult to choose which patients to treat and which to turn away. He said that they couldn’t always treat the most severely injured, and he always had to think of the best way to use their limited resources.

In Japan, he sends small teams everyday to go from house to house to treat people who can’t travel.

“You have to pick ones that have a good chance of survival,” Merin said.

Merin wrote on his blog that in addition to the humanitarian aid his team offers the Japanese victims, the team is also showing the rest of the world what Israel has to offer.

“We are getting excellent coverage from the media here, so the feeling is that we are on a humanitarian mission while also providing good [public relations] for Israel. ”

To read more about Dr. Merin and his medical team’s ongoing work in Japan, follow his blog at <http://szinjapan.tumblr.com/>.

With files from Marni Shankman