

Promoting Mutual Tolerance, Respect and Understanding through Cancer Palliation

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Last week I was privileged to organize a Pediatric Palliative Care Workshop of the Middle East Cancer Consortium (MECC) in Larnaca, Cyprus, that brought together health-care professionals from Turkey, Cyprus (both Greek and Turkish parts), Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, Pakistan, Morocco and Uganda. This forum meets every year in Cyprus to explore the best ways to alleviate the suffering of cancer victims. It is inspiring. Universal empathy for the terminally ill and the dying breaks through political walls and overpowers religious and cultural differences. The dominant language in the meeting is that of compassion, solidarity and human decency. Such a gathering calls for hope where geopolitical conflicts rule, for the building of bridges to common ground[1].

The faculty from the United States described the most recent advances in palliative care, whereas the participants from the Middle East exalted the role of the extended family as an important companion of the dying during their final journey. The familiarity with death, which is decreasing in developed countries, produces a unique appreciation of the gifts of life and of the sacredness of each human being endowed with a special mission for which no advanced technologies can stand in[2].

All the participants learned some secrets of complementary medicine, including self meditation and imagery, which do not require other resources beyond people committed to their humanitarian and professional mission.

Following a previous MECC meeting Dr. Lodovico Balducci from Tampa, Florida stated: "At the meeting I had an epiphany of redemption as the most rewarding life experience". One could find that the participants in last week's meeting, too, were all proud to redeem somebody else's outstanding debts. By helping each other to soothe a pain they had not caused, they had found a mission, a meaning in their own life.

MECC is the brainchild of Secretary Donna Shalala who, through the National Cancer Institute (NCI) in Bethesda, MD, empowered professionals in the Middle East to develop such a regional initiative.

The majority of countries participating in MECC activities are Islamic countries, extending from the Magreb (Morocco) through the Mashriq (Egypt Jordan, Palestine, Iraq) to Central Asia (Pakistan). Many of the representatives from these countries are women – physicians, psychologists or nurses with advanced training, who serve as very assertive advocates of cancer patients under their care and of the families participating in the ordeal of cancer care. Along with their close observance of Islamic customs, these women could not have presented a better role model of free, assertive and effective caregivers. Moreover, it seemed that the very constraints that prevent them from experiencing the modern aspects of lifestyles, make them focus on the liberty to pursue activities that fill their lives with a sense of meaning.

Judaism (Israel) and Christianity (Copts in Egypt, Maronites in Lebanon, Greek Orthodox in Cyprus, Roman Catholics and Assyrians) are strongly represented in all MECC activities. All the three major religious beliefs provide a meaningful venue to healing, as for all three traditions, the care and comfort of the suffering is more than just a commandment. It is also an opportunity to become partners in God's ongoing creation [3].

During years of patient and discrete work, far from the limelight of world media, MECC has inspired the loyalty and devotion of women and men, regardless of their faith, ethnic, cultural and social heritage. They have discovered the relief of their neighbor's suffering to be their ultimate reward[4].

Thanks to this common endeavor members of the MECC family have been able to disregard and overcome centuries of hostility and to share experiences and resources as members of a loving family [5]. The progress in treating patients' suffering in Middle Eastern countries seems to have made some quantum leaps; while taking care of people and families, not just the disease.

An organization such as MECC stands as proof that professionals in a conflicted region can work together as a common group, while putting their energy towards tackling great afflictions such as cancer and suffering [6-8].

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