

Breast Cancer in the Gaza Strip: The Struggle for Survival of Fatma Bargouth

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INTRODUCTION

Fatma Bargouth died of breast cancer one year ago, at the age of 29. Her story is similar to the stories of hundreds of other individuals who have had the misfortune to be affected by cancer in places like Gaza. The daily difficulties (well documented by Physicians for Human Rights – Israel¹) which she had to face in order to fight against her illness are indicative of the social suffering and deterioration of quality of life of the general Palestinian population, especially over the past five years. These hardships are particularly grave for those suffering from serious illness.

Fatma's story tells us several things. First, it is illustrative of the epidemiological transition of the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) - that cancer and other non-communicable diseases are now the main causes of death of Palestinian people. However, the health system in the Gaza Strip in particular - and in the oPt in general - is not able to properly address the oncological problems which affect the population. Lack of appropriate quality of care, lack of expertise and adequate equipment, and an unsatisfactory physician/patient's relationship are clear from this story. As a result of these problems, the Palestinian health system needs to refer many cancer patients to services abroad.

This referral abroad – outside of Gaza or the West Bank – to Israel (and also to Jordan and Egypt) is extremely complex and problematic, due to the strict inhuman regime of closures and cumbersome mechanisms of permits. The story is pervaded by the lack of humanity. In spite of the encouraging role played by a few institutions and individuals and, especially by the strong determination and character shown by Fatma to fight against her tumor and the horrific context, the story highlights the lack of basic rights, the lack of competence, and the lack of compassion inherent to the current socio-political situation. We hope the suffering revealed by this story will help to generate more awareness and, as a consequence, action in order to fight this lack of humanity.

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¹ This story is mainly related to a previous publication of Physicians for Human Rights/Maskit Bendel 'Breast cancer in the Gaza Strip: A death foretold' January 2005



HOW LONG COULD ONE EXPECT TO WAIT FOR AN ACCURATE CANCER DIAGNOSIS IN THE GAZA STRIP?

On April 15, 2003, 26-year-old Fatma Bargouth discovered a lump in her breast. She immediately went to see a surgeon at Shifa Hospital, where she had an x-ray and biopsy. After waiting ten days for the results, she was referred for retesting on the grounds that the sample included such a large amount of blood and fluids that the test was unsatisfactory. Fatma underwent a second (true cut) biopsy and again waited two weeks for the outcome. When the results finally arrived, her doctor told her that she had a benign lump, known as “fibroadenoma.”

Fatma’s lump, however, continued to grow. She returned to visit her doctor in his private clinic a fourth, fifth, and sixth time. “There’s nothing wrong with you,” another physician, a partner in the clinic, told her. “I don’t want to see you here for another year.”

By June, the lump was no less than 2 x 5 x 3 centimeters in size. Fatma returned once again to the surgeon’s clinic, requesting that he remove the tumor regardless of whether or not it was malignant. He refused to do so on the grounds that the removal of a growth of such size would leave her breast disfigured. By this time, Fatma had two adjacent tumors in her breast, one small and one large. The surgeon finally agreed to remove the larger lump for a fee of \$200 and also to refer Fatma for a sonogram. Two weeks later, the Shifa Hospital Histopathological Lab sent Fatma results indicating that the lump had been benign. The surgeon again told Fatma that there was nothing. “Everything will be fine once you get married” the examining doctor said.

No sooner was the surgery completed, however, before two new tumors appeared next to where the removed tumor had been. The tumor continued to spread and before long it reached Fatma’s lymph nodes.

In August, Fatma visited a doctor of the Shifa Hospital Oncology Department in his private clinic. The doctor examined her, insisted like the others that there was nothing wrong with her, and prescribed antibiotics. Still, not only was the lump in Fatma’s breast continuing to



grow, but she had detected additional lumps in her underarm area, as well.

Fatma visited the physician again soon afterwards. This time he told her, “What you have was caused by your bra, which fits too tightly.” Fatma insisted that something else was wrong. The doctor referred her for a sonogram and an x-ray, reviewed the test results, and continued to insist that there was no cause for concern.

Still unconvinced, Fatma returned to the surgeon who had performed her surgery. He took a biopsy and sent it to the lab. This time, the results were clear: Fatma Bargouth suffered from a carcinoma, a malignant growth.

It was thus no less than 164 days after Fatma first discovered the lump in her breast that she began a regimen of chemotherapy at Shifa Hospital. Had it not been for her continued insistence that she receive a diagnosis accurately fitting the behavior of the tumor, she might never have begun treatment. By that time she did, however, the cancer had already spread considerably.

HOW ISRAELI INSTITUTIONS AND INDIVIDUALS CAN EITHER SUPPORT OR TORTURE A PALESTINIAN WOMAN AFFECTED BY CANCER: A KAFKIAN EXPERIENCE

Following nine cycles of chemotherapy at Shifa Hospital, she requested a referral to a hospital in Israel. When her doctors refused, Fatma resolved to act on her own. She independently sent the biopsy results that indicated her carcinoma to Tel Hashomer Hospital. Seeing that her illness had reached a critical stage and proper treatment was urgent, the staff at Tel Hashomer summoned her to come quickly.

It was then that Fatma’s ordeals took a different turn. On three separate occasions she applied to the **Gaza District Coordination Office (DCO)** for an entry permit for treatment in Israel. Each time she received no response, neither approval nor denial. On November 13,



2003, Fatma asked the **Physicians for Human Rights - Israel (PHR)** to intervene. After consulting with specialists and enlisting the help of board member Professor Rafi Waldan, PHR-Israel was able to make an urgent appointment for Fatma on November 25. She reapplied for an entry permit to no avail: when the day of her appointment arrived, she was still yet to hear any response.

When a legally established system is not enough to remove unjust obstacles

Given the medical urgency of the situation, PHR-Israel decided to appeal to the court system. PHR-Israel's attorney, Yossi Tzur of Carmeli-Arnon law offices represented Fatma Bargouth in an urgent petition². On December 12, 2003, PHR-Israel received the State Attorney's response, which stated:

Following examination of the case in this appeal vs. the respondents, including security factors, the respondents' attorney has informed the appellant's attorney that the appellant will be allowed to enter Israel on December 7, 2003 in order to receive treatment at Sheba Hospital at Tel Hashomer Hospital.

The first obstacle to saving Fatma Bargouth's life was thus removed, and she began a regimen of weekly chemotherapy at Tel Hashomer Hospital. Every time she passed to Israel she had to call upon PHR-Israel's intervention, and even then she was forced to spend hours waiting at Erez checkpoint. She came to all treatment sessions alone, as no one was allowed to accompany her.

The obstacles and difficulties did not stop there. Fatma's access to life-saving treatment in Israel was obstructed at nearly every turn, throughout the entire year of 2004. On the day of one January appointment, during her second month of chemotherapy, Fatma arrived

² High Court of Justice Case # 10642/03



at Erez checkpoint only to be denied passage. A new appointment was made for the following day. PHR-Israel attorney Yossi Tzur sent urgent letters to both the Legal Advisor in the Gaza Strip and the State Attorney, and a new permit was issued. Fatma arrived at the checkpoint, waited several hours, and was finally allowed to enter Israel at 1:00 p.m. When she arrived at Tel Hashomer Hospital an hour and a half later, however, the hospital's outpatient clinic had already closed.

When bureaucracy becomes a nightmare

On February 9, Fatma had another appointment at Tel Hashomer Hospital for removal of her breast tumor. She arrived at Erez checkpoint in the early morning hours and waited alone the entire day. When she was still waiting at the checkpoint at 5:30 p.m., PHR-Israel did everything in its power to try to enable her passage. It made several calls to the Legal Advisor in the Gaza Strip, phoned the spokesperson for the Coordinator of Government Operations in the Territories, and even phoned journalist Carmela Menashe at "Kol Israel" radio. It also made innumerable calls to the Gaza DCO, which was to have processed the entry permit. The soldier handling the permit, however, was on kitchen duty. She could not be reached and no one was filling the position in her absence.

At 6:30 that evening, Fatma finally made it through the checkpoint and on to Tel Hashomer Hospital. There she underwent tests in preparation for surgery to remove the tumor, which was scheduled for the next morning. Two days after the first surgery, doctors informed Fatma that the disease had spread and they would have to perform a full mastectomy and remove two lymph nodes. Fatma was completely alone both during and after these two operations. Despite the doctors' explicit requests, her family members were not allowed to travel in order to be by her side. She thus had no recourse but to recover from major surgery without the support of any visitors.

Fatma eventually made it back to Gaza. On March 25, she had another appointment at Tel Hashomer Hospital for a simulation process in preparation for radiotherapy. She did not receive a permit, however, and was thus forbidden from leaving Gaza. A new appointment was made for two weeks later, at which time she managed to get there.



Upon the completion of the simulation process, Fatma was registered for radiotherapy treatments every day for the next 25 days. At that time, Erez checkpoint was frequently under closure, which caused many cancer patients, including those on chemotherapy or radiotherapy regimens, to miss treatment appointments.

Due to circumstances at the checkpoint and the importance of therapeutic continuity, PHR-Israel applied to the Gaza DCO to allow another patient with cancer and Fatma to stay in Israel during their respective therapies. Both requests were denied. PHR-Israel and “One in Nine: Women for Victims of Breast Cancer” then filed two individual appeals with the High Court of Justice requesting that the women be allowed to stay in Israel for the full course of their radiotherapy. Upon submission of the appeals, the State announced that it would allow the two to stay in Israel.

Fatma’s struggle, however, was not over. She received a permit good for only a single month, even though her treatment was five-weeks long. During the entire month, PHR-Israel made great efforts to have the permit extended so that Fatma would not be forced to stay in Israel illegally in order to complete her treatment. During this period, Fatma stayed at the home of a PHR-Israel staff member in Tel Aviv. When the regimen was complete, she returned to Gaza.

The treatment was successful, and it appeared as if her cancer was cured and her life saved. Less than one month after the completion of radiation treatments, however, the cancer returned. Fatma’s condition deteriorated quickly, and she came to suffer severe pain in her back and legs. PHR-Israel insisted that, this time, Fatma’s mother be allowed to accompany her to treatments, and at last the necessary permit was granted.

On July 22, Fatma returned to Tel Hashomer Hospital by ambulance as she was no longer able to stand up. Tests showed that the cancer had metastasized to her spinal column. Her doctors determined that she would need an additional chemotherapy regimen, and she was hospitalized for a series of arduous daily treatments.



When economic capacity prevents the dignity of dying

Fatma's condition declined further within the week. With her mother at her side, Fatma requested to see the rest of her family one last time. An urgent request to allow their entry was submitted to the Gaza DCO, but no response was received. On August 2, the DCO informed PHR-Israel that only three family members would be allowed entry: Fatma's father and two of her sisters.

They arrived at Erez checkpoint the next morning and, after waiting for hours, were returned to Gaza. The Border Police refused to allow their entry into Israel, unless they submitted a guarantee deposit of 30,000 NIS (more than 6,000 USD) per person. Attorney Yossi Tzur contacted the State Attorney's office and protested on behalf of PHR-Israel. Stating its willingness to compromise, the State announced that each family member could cross with a deposit of only 20,000 NIS (more than 4,000 USD) each. Even a small fraction of this sum, however, was well beyond the family's means.

PHR-Israel's continued to insist and even threaten to submit a petition to the High Court of Justice. On August 9, 2004, the Gaza DCO finally granted entry permits to Fatma's father and two sisters. When they came to Erez and received the permits the next day, however, they were once again stopped by border police. This time PHR-Israel requested the assistance of an Israeli Member of Parliament. With his intervention, Fatma's two sisters were allowed entry into Israel on August 16; three weeks after the initial request had been submitted. Her father was forced to remain in Gaza.

When delays are not due to external factors

In the days that followed, the dedicated staff of the oncology department at Tel Hashomer Hospital succeeded in stabilizing Fatma's condition. After a taxing course of therapy, she was sent to continue chemotherapy back in Gaza. There Fatma waited about a month for the Palestinian Health Ministry to approve her expensive chemotherapy regimen, order the necessary medication, and ensure their arrival at Shifa Hospital. During this time her condition worsened. She soon found that



she suffered severe pain and had difficulty breathing. Her physician at Tel Hashomer Hospital instructed her to return without delay.

Fatma and her sister arrived at Erez checkpoint on September 5, holding permits to enter Israel. The border police claimed that the previous time Fatma left Gaza, she had done so without a permit. The claim was absurd – no one leaves or enters Gaza without a permit. The mistake was eventually resolved, and Fatma and her sister were allowed to go pass through to Israel that evening.

Fatma was to begin a regimen of chemotherapy and radiation treatments at Tel Hashomer Hospital on September 14. She requested to submit an application for a permit at the office of Palestinian Health Coordinator. The coordinator declined to forward her application, however, claiming that the Israelis were refusing to accept requests due to the closure. At the Bargouth family's insistence, the coordinator submitted the application to the Gaza DCO Health Coordinator a few days later. The Health Coordinator's office assured a PHR-Israel staff person that the permit would be processed and issued on time. One of Fatma's physicians at Tel Hashomer Hospital directly contacted the Israeli Health Coordinator at the DCO, and asked him to expedite the processing of the application due to Fatma's serious medical condition. Weinberger promised her he would issue the permit that day or the next.

The day of Fatma's September 14 appointment at Tel Hashomer Hospital arrived. It was 5:30 p.m. before the DCO informed PHR-Israel that the permit had been issued and that Fatma must get to the checkpoint. The permit allowed for neither an accompanying person nor an ambulance. As Fatma was no longer able to walk, she was thus not able to make it to the hospital.

PHR-Israel requested that a new permit be issued for Fatma for the following day. The DCO responded that Fatma would have to start the application process again from the beginning, even though it already had all of her medical documents and written notification of her appointment at Tel Hashomer Hospital. Another urgent application was submitted to the Palestinian coordinator. The application was forwarded to the DCO until September 19: five days after Fatma's appointment at Tel Hashomer Hospital's had passed.



When holidays and security conflict with the right to care

On September 15, 2004, full closure was imposed on the Occupied Territories because of the Jewish New Year. At the end of September, Israel invaded the Gaza Strip in “Operation Days of Repentance.” The Gaza Strip continued under closure for months. Meanwhile, Fatma’s medical condition continued to worsen. All of PHR-Israel’s appeals to the DCO were to no avail: Fatma was not allowed to leave Gaza for treatment.

On September 27, 2004, a delegation of Israeli female doctors went to the Gaza DCO on behalf of PHR-Israel and the “One in Nine” organization. They demanded to meet with the commander, in order to explain the repercussions of preventing patients, especially those suffering from cancer, from receiving treatment. After a long wait they came to realize the commander refused to meet with them. In his place, a lower-ranking officer heard the doctors’ explanations and assured them that he would consider how to facilitate Gazan patients’ entry to Israel for treatment. He also promised that Fatma Bargouth, who was in extremely grave condition, would be allowed to go for her treatment at Tel Hashomer Hospital.

When a breast implant has to pass the security check

Fatma and her mother arrived at Erez checkpoint the next day to find it closed. They waited until 5:00 p.m. Fatma, exhausted and in severe pain, lay down on the ground, as there was no bench or seat of any kind on which to sit. When the check finally began, soldiers ordered Fatma to remove her longer outer dress (jilbab) because the security system indicated that she had “something” in her chest. Fatma followed the soldiers’ orders and explained to them that she had a silicone breast implant. Subsequently, an Arabic-speaking officer arrived and shouted at her, “Why did you take your dress off, don’t you know that’s not allowed?” Fatma tried to explain that the soldiers had ordered her to remove her dress. The soldiers refused to allow Fatma and her mother to cross the checkpoint and sent them back to Gaza. The DCO informed



PHR-Israel that Fatma and her mother were denied entry because they “did not pass the security check.”

When an ambulance has to pass during military activity

On September 28, 2004, Fatma and her mother waited again at Erez checkpoint. When the checkpoint was still closed at 6:45 p.m., they returned home. Early the next morning, the Gaza DCO assured a PHR-Israel staff person that Fatma and her mother would be issued entry permits that day. The permits were ready at 10:00 a.m. Fatma and her mother rode to the checkpoint in an ambulance along with six others: a uterine cancer patient, a liver cancer patient, a child burn victim, and their respective escorts. All were on their way to Tel Hashomer Hospital for treatment. They were traveling on the Beit Lahiyah road towards Erez checkpoint when military activity, including gunfire, made it impossible to continue the journey. By 4:30 p.m., they were still unable to get through. An attempt to get to Erez checkpoint via a detour path failed. The DCO maintained that the ambulance had a permit but that “it is simply afraid to go on.” At 5:40 p.m. the ambulance returned with its passengers to Gaza.

When no persons or medicines are allowed to cross a border

At 9:00 that night, a physician from the Tel Hashomer Oncology Department called a PHR-Israel staff person. They discussed Fatma’s situation and tried to come up with, at the very least, some way to send medication and pain relievers to her in Gaza. Yet even this proved impossible: due to the closure on Gaza, the Karni Passage was closed, and entry to Gaza via Erez checkpoint was prohibited. At 10:45p.m., the Gaza DCO notified PHR-Israel that permits had been issued for Fatma and her mother for the next day. As the road was completely destroyed and occupied by tanks, however, the ambulance was unable to reach Erez checkpoint yet again. Again the possibility of sending drugs to Fatma into Gaza was considered, and again Fatma applied for an entry permit.



When a death can be an advantage to a dying person

By October 4, 2004, the much-needed permit was still yet to arrive. Suffering terrible pain, Fatma was hospitalized at Shifa Hospital. Her hemoglobin level had dropped to 7.13 and she had to be administered oxygen in order to breathe properly. The doctors at Shifa were able to treat her for two days with chemotherapy drugs left over from a patient who had passed away.

A week later, the Gaza DCO told PHR-Israel to instruct Fatma to apply for an entry permit via Health Coordinator Ahmad Abu Raza. As it turned out, Abu Raza was “stuck” in Nuseirrat refugee camp due to fighting in the area, and no one else was able to submit patients’ applications in his place. The next day Abu Raza had returned to his office, and Fatma and her mother went to visit him. He informed that that he could not submit their applications because the fax machine at the Gaza DCO was out of order, which the DCO confirmed. At PHR-Israel’s insistence, the DCO consented to coordinate the permit with Abu Raza by telephone. However, it demanded that PHR-Israel submit a new letter from Fatma’s physician and a new order for hospitalization. The DCO also maintained that from then on a permit would no longer be sufficient, and coordination would also be necessary. They assured that Fatma’s coordination would be done the following morning.

When an ambulance can be shot

On the morning of October 14, Fatma was unable to stand up and could only reach Erez checkpoint via ambulance. However, Israeli military activity in the northern Gaza Strip had completely destroyed the roads leading to Erez checkpoint. An ambulance that had attempted to transport a seriously ill patient to the checkpoint the previous day had been forced to stop and remained stuck on the road. With the help of Gazan colleagues, PHR-Israel managed to organize an ambulance ride for Fatma and her mother to the checkpoint. The “ambulance” was actually a Red Cross utility vehicle, the only kind of vehicle able to handle the ruins.



The vehicle encountered trouble on the way to Erez checkpoint. At 1:00 p.m., as it approached the Abraj al-Awda neighborhood, Israeli soldiers shot at the ambulance and it was forced to halt. It was 7:00 p.m. before the ambulance was able to continue on its way, and Fatma and her mother went through the checkpoint into Israel. At that point, an entire month had passed since Fatma's original chemotherapy appointment.

When death does not stop the agony

Fatma Bargouth died at her home in Gaza on December 24, 2004, with her family at her side. Nevertheless, her family's agony did not end there. They wished to bury Fatma in Gaza's new cemetery, situated northeast of the Jabaliya refugee camp, as it was the only cemetery with available burial plots. The family could not even get close to the area, however, as it was under nearly constant fire by Israeli soldiers. They thus had no choice but to bury Fatma in Gaza's old cemetery in a grave that already contained the remains of two other women.





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