

## Progress of *The Lancet* Palestinian Health Alliance



In 2009, *The Lancet* published a Series of five reports about health in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), citing 568 references and involving 37 international researchers, of whom 19 were based in the oPt. To maintain the momentum of this collaboration, *The Lancet* Palestinian Health Alliance (LPHA) was established.

4 years and three scientific conferences later, LPHA comprises a vibrant and productive network of Palestinian, regional, and international researchers, committed to the highest scientific standards in describing, analysing, and evaluating the health and health care of Palestinian people, contributing to the international scientific literature, and developing local evidence-based policy and practice. Activities include development of scientific methods and health measures that are specific to context and culture; increasing the capacity for research, including mentoring of young and inexperienced researchers; encouragement of advocacy based on science; and promotion of academic collaboration within the oPt, across the region, and worldwide. For clarification, oPt, also referred to as the State of Palestine,<sup>1</sup> comprises the Gaza Strip and West Bank (including East Jerusalem).

The results of a literature review presented at the conference in Beirut, Lebanon, in 2012 showed a steady increase in the numbers of research reports about Palestinian health since the Oslo Accords, with a further boost after the *Lancet* Series in 2009. Abstracts from the LPHA conferences in Birzeit, oPt, in 2010, Beirut, Lebanon, in 2012, and Cairo, Egypt, in 2013, and a scientific writers' workshop in Birzeit in 2011, have been published online by *The Lancet*. These abstracts are a small part of the overall literature, but having passed the standard of peer review for *The Lancet*, they provide a basis for reviewing the progress of the LPHA. The abstracts from the conference in Cairo published in *The Lancet* this year include 18 of 22 accepted for oral presentation at the conference, 16 of 43 accepted for poster presentation, and two invited presentations (about how emergency services dealt with the November, 2012, attack on the Gaza Strip).

After reviewing 20 years of research publications for the 2009 *Lancet* Series, the LPHA steering group was unsure at the outset how frequently new research findings would be reported. Although we planned initially to hold a scientific conference every 2 years, the productivity and

enthusiasm of the researchers for Palestinian health now justify a conference every year.

Scientific writing and preparatory workshops in Birzeit, Beirut, and the Gaza Strip, held between the main conferences, have helped to increase the number and quality of submissions. For the Beirut conference, 49 (58%) oral and poster presentations were accepted from 85 submissions. For the Cairo conference, 65 (48%) presentations were accepted from 135 submissions. With the increasing number of scientific submissions, a rigorous peer-review process, with three international reviewers per abstract, has been established to select the best quality abstracts.

The proportion of authors from the oPt has increased, from 99 (59%) of the 167 authors contributing to 61 abstracts for the *Lancet* series about research in the oPt from the 2010–12 meetings, to 112 (71%) of the 157 authors of 65 abstracts accepted for the Cairo meeting in 2013. Authors from the oPt were mostly from universities, of which eight universities were represented at the Cairo conference, with an increasing number of researchers from other institutions. The authors of 65 abstracts accepted for the Cairo conference included 23 students studying for Masters or PhD degrees, and 13 of these students were first authors.

Researchers from the American University of Beirut have contributed their findings from a series of studies on the health of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, whereas researchers from the UN Relief and Works Agency for

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For the **Health in the Occupied Palestinian Territory 2009 Series** see <http://www.thelancet.com/series/health-in-the-occupied-palestinian-territory>

For the **Research in the Occupied Palestinian Territory 2010 Abstracts** see <http://www.thelancet.com/health-in-the-occupied-palestinian-territory-2010>

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Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) have contributed results from studies of Palestinian refugees across the region.

26 (40%) of 65 abstracts presented at the Cairo conference came from the West Bank, ten (15%) from the Gaza Strip, 18 (28%) jointly from the West Bank and Gaza Strip, five (8%) from Lebanon, and five (8%) from UNRWA. International collaboration remains strong, involving researchers from 30 universities on four continents and in 14 countries. Not surprisingly, in view of travel restrictions, international collaboration was a feature of only three of ten abstracts from the Gaza Strip, compared with 15 of 26 from the West Bank.

39 (60%) of 65 abstracts presented at the Cairo conference were about studies of primary data. 25 (38%) were about the increasing use of secondary, often routine, data to assess health need and to audit services. Descriptive epidemiological studies, usually involving population or patient surveys, remain the most common type of study, but about a fifth of studies were qualitative, capturing the experiences of patients or professionals. The number of clinical audits, to measure clinical activity in hospitals and community clinics, is increasing. Evaluations of interventions are still unusual.

LPHA has grown by providing the challenge, opportunity, and support needed for Palestinian researchers to produce and present research findings at a high level. The LPHA's first aim of presenting and publishing research findings is being achieved—faster and in greater numbers than anyone expected.

The number of young researchers augurs well for the future. Although international partnerships are still important, there is an increasing number of academic and service partners within the oPt. Peer review and capacity building within the oPt have been key features of these changes, helping to increase the number of high-quality studies describing and explaining the health and health care of Palestinian people.

\*Graham Watt, Rita Giacaman, Huda Zurayk, Richard Horton, on behalf of the LPHA Steering Group  
 Institute of Health and Wellbeing, University of Glasgow, Glasgow G12 8QQ, UK (GW); Institute of Community and Public Health, Birzeit University, Ramallah, West Bank, occupied Palestinian territory (RG); Faculty of Health Sciences, American University of Beirut, Lebanon (HZ); and *The Lancet*, London, UK (RH)  
 graham.watt@glasgow.ac.uk

GW is a trustee of the UK charity Medical Aid for Palestinians. RG and HZ declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

The LPHA Steering Group comprises Niveen M E Abu-Rmeileh, Rita Giacaman, Abdullatif Husseini, and Samia Halileh, Institute of Community and Public Health, Birzeit University, Ramallah, West Bank, occupied Palestinian territory; Rajaie Batniji, Stanford University, CA, USA; Espen Bjertness and Gerd Holmboe-Ottensen, Department of Community Medicine, University of Oslo, Norway; Iain Chalmers, James Lind Initiative, Oxford, UK; Rima R Habib and Huda Zurayk, Faculty of Health Sciences, American University of Beirut, Lebanon; Dennis Hogan, Department of Sociology, Brown University, RI, USA; Richard Horton, *The Lancet*, London, UK; Jennifer Leaning, Harvard School of Public Health, Cambridge, MA, USA; Harry Shannon, Department of Clinical Epidemiology and Biostatistics, McMaster University, Hamilton, ON, Canada; Graham Watt, Institute of Health and Wellbeing, University of Glasgow, UK; and John S Yudkin, University College London, London, UK.

1 UN General Assembly. Resolution adopted by the General Assembly. 67/19. Status of Palestine in the United Nations. Dec 4, 2012. <http://unispal.un.org/unispal.nsf/28ead5e67368b9ea852579180070e4d6/19862d03c564fa2c85257acb004ee69b70?openDocument> (accessed Oct 25, 2013).

## Palestinian health research

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2.7 million Palestinians live in the West Bank (including 404 000 in East Jerusalem), occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), and 1.7 million in the Gaza Strip, oPt; an estimated 5.1 million Palestinians live in Arab countries, mainly Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria (many now refugees again in Lebanon); and 1.4 million Palestinians live in Israel, where they comprise about 20% of the population.<sup>1,2</sup> 5 million Palestinians are registered as refugees, defined by the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) as “persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of

the 1948 conflict”.<sup>3</sup> Nearly a third of refugees still live in refugee camps.

The West Bank has been under Israeli military occupation since 1967. The Palestinian Authority controls 22% of the land and has access to 13% of the water. In 2012, about 350 000 Jewish settlers lived in 118 officially recognised settlements in the West Bank, while an estimated 200 000–300 000 Israelis lived in settlements in East Jerusalem.<sup>4</sup> The Gaza Strip is one of the most densely populated areas in the world. It was invaded by the Israeli army in 2008–09, attacked again in 2012, and has been under economic siege since 2006. Both the West Bank and Gaza Strip are chronically