Quebec Chapter - Tunisia twinning: January 2007 visit

François Laroche, President of the CHSQ

The partnership between the Quebec Chapter (CHSQ) and the Tunisian Hemophilia Association (ATH) produced some memorable moments from January 18 to 25 during the second CHSQ visit to Tunisia. The Quebec delegation was made up of the following members: Dr. Georges-Étienne Rivard, Director of the Hemophilia Treatment Centre (HTC) at Sainte-Justine Hospital in Montreal; Nichan Zourikian, physiotherapist attached to the HTC at Sainte-Justine Hospital; David Page, Vice President, Communications and Public Policy with the World Federation of Hemophilia (WFH); Patricia Stewart, Chair of the International Projects Committee at the CHSQ; and François Laroche, then Vice President of the CHSQ.

On Friday, the day after our arrival, there was a medical symposium entitled: Tunisia-Quebec Hemophilia Day. Under Honorary Patron Her Excellency Mrs. Leila Ben Ali, wife of the President of the Republic of Tunisia, the symposium was officially opened by Mrs. Naziha Cheikh, Secretary of State in the Tunisian Ministry of Public Health, and Mr. Bruno Picard, Canadian Ambassador to Tunisia. The presence of these two dignitaries, and above all the fact that the wife of President Ben Ali had agreed to act as Honorary Patron for the event, drew a large number of reporters.

The main goals of the symposium were as follows:
• Raise public awareness about hemophilia through the media
• Increase the number of cases of hemophilia recorded by raising health professionals’ awareness about hemophilia
• Improve care and treatment provided to hemophiliacs through knowledge acquired from the talks, especially those given by hematologists
• Improve care provided to hemophiliacs through the workshop for physiotherapists.

A total of sixty physicians (hematologists, orthopedists, general practitioners, etc.) took part, along with laboratory technicians, biologists, physiotherapists, dentists, and representatives of the blood product supplier (Pasteur Institute), mainly from the four major cities in Tunisia (Tunis, Sousse, Sfax, and Gafsa), in addition to representatives of the two associations. At the end of the day, the participants said they were delighted with the wealth of information and quality of the discussions. From the opening talks to the closing reception, everything went very smoothly, all to the credit of the Organizing Committee. The mere fact of securing the patronage of M rs. Ben Ali was a great accomplishment by the ATH.

Even though the following day, Saturday, was the Muslim New Year and a national holiday, we were still received at Aziza Othmana Hospital by the Head of the Clinical and Biological Hematology Department, Dr. Balkis Meddeb. We were able to visit the clinical and biological haematology facilities, the new haematology treatment centre (in preparation), and meet with the hospital director. David Page gave a talk on the various WFH programs, such as the Global Alliance for Progress. In the afternoon, François Laroche gave a talk on strategic considerations in an organization, and Patricia Stewart followed with another talk on basic principles of fundraising.

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On Monday, January 22, we had two activities on the program for which we had to divide the delegation in two. François and David accompanied several doctors and member of the ATH to meet the Minister of Public Health, Dr. Rihad Kechrid. After explaining the situation of people with hemophilia in Tunisia and discussing with each of the members of the delegation, the Minister made a commitment that “Tunisians with hemophilia should have access to the best treatment available and adequate comprehensive care by the State.” This commitment was certainly one of the high points of our visit, and it is very encouraging for the future of care to those with hemophilia in the country. Physiotherapy was the other item on the day’s agenda, with a theoretical training session in the morning for Tunisian physiotherapists, led by Nichan Zourikian. The afternoon was devoted to case studies with young people with hemophilia who had come to consult the experts with their parents. Our general impression of this visit is extremely positive. We once again noted a strong will to improve living conditions for Tunisians with hemophilia on the part of both health professionals and ATH volunteers. The impending opening of an official hemophilia treatment centre in the Hematology Department of Aziza Othmana Hospital will make a tremendous contribution toward this goal. The involvement of a number of hematologists together with volunteers who are dedicated to the cause gives the organization a lot of credibility with government officials. In the ATH there are people with remarkable lobbying skills, and the organization is gradually discovering the almost limitless possibilities this can open up. At present, 270 people with hemophilia have been registered in Tunisia, out of a population of 10 million (therefore out of a potential total of 1000 people with hemophilia). Of these 270 people with hemophilia, 130 (or 48%) have the severe form of the disease. Since our last visit in 2005, Tunisia’s consumption of factor VIII has increased from 0.15 International Units (IU) per capita of total population to a little more than 0.3 IU/capita. Factor VIII concentrate has tripled from 0.1 IU/capita to 0.3 IU/capita (largely due to a better tendering process resulting in lower prices), whereas the standard for adequate treatment of hemophilia, according to the WFH, is 1.0 IU/capita. Consumption of factor VIII in Canada is 5.0 IU/capita.

The CHSQ is very enthusiastic about the care that can be provided to Tunisians with hemophilia in the future. A very promising solidarity has emerged between the two organizations. Tunisians have a reputation as a warm and welcoming people, a reputation they well deserve. The hospitality we received throughout our long stay was superb, and the CHSQ hopes to be able to extend its partnership with the ATH for several more years.