

Do They Know It's Christmas

By Dr Toh Han Chong, Editor



On a recent scenic sun-soaked *Sensory*-style holiday to Tasmania with three other doctors and their families, we banked our rented cars on a road island near a region of Cradle Mountain named the Walls of Jerusalem to double-check directions, when a screeching car tore past and a Tasmanian redneck stuck her head out and swore racist obscenities at us. I do not think the eight children in our party realised this ugly blip on the otherwise idyllic landscape.

Since the child is a focus of this season, and a prominent psychiatrist is featured in this *SMA News* Christmas issue, I started to think about whether seeds of discrimination could begin at a young age. One wonders what scars must have been inflicted on a young Adolf Hitler when his half-Jewish father, Alois Hitler, ashamed of being of mixed Jewish descent, used to beat his son Adolf mercilessly. And could Saddam Hussein's lonely childhood with an unloving, hostile stepfather have affected his political judgment in later life?

One of the enduring TV images this year was PLO Leader Yasser Arafat's coffin arriving in Ramallah to throngs of emotive Palestinians. I became more curious about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict than even with the cause of Arafat's death, or Dan Brown's *en vogue* Da Vinci Code. Genocide and the Holocaust horror, a desperate race, escape to a distant site, claims to new land, a siege mentality, a long insurgency in a redefined homeland, finger-pointing, moral and media relativism, deception, disguise, collusion, collaboration, terrorism and assassinations by extremists on both sides, recruitment of powerful forces to back their causes, exploiting ideologies as a scapegoat or sacrificial lamb to justify their just wars, are but some of what I learned about this conflict. It sounds uncannily like cancer biology. On 30 September 2000, I saw TV images of a terrified, voiceless, helpless, homeless young Palestinian refugee boy, Muhammad al-Durra, hiding behind an oil drum with his father's protecting arm around him. He was cut down and killed, together with his father and the ambulance driver attempting to save them, by a hail of presumed Israeli bullets. On 11 September 2001, after a night of resuscitating a patient who had died very rapidly in hospital surrounded by a hysterical family and a screaming wife who collapsed on the floor by his bedside, I returned home to a surreal sight on TV. The Twin Towers had just been hit by commercial planes.



I just met a GP friend who lamented about the plight of the GP facing a hailstorm of corporate competition, managed care and declining morale. Multi-level marketing and sleeping pill dispensing became cautionary tales this year. Meanwhile, in the Singapore General Hospital's Houseman Canteen, the Cheers bar of Outram campus where everybody knows your name, and where our troubles are all the same, there has been chatter about what keeps a doctor loyal to the institution as there has been an exodus of doctors to the Promised Land of Free Market Medicine – nevermind some risks involved like crossing the Red (as opposed to the “Being in the Financial Black”) Sea.

Conversations with doctors from both healthcare clusters reveal some discontent unique to their own cluster cultures, as well as each side feeling they were the underdogs in the fight for brownie points and market share in Singapore healthcare.

In an eight-month period from Christmas time in 1992, highly secret talks between top Israeli and Palestinian leaders took place in the warm gracious home of Norwegian Foreign Minister Johan Jorgen

Holst and his wife Marianne, to move for a Middle East peace plan. In this calm homely setting, tensions and hatred between old foes dissolved when both sides happily played and crawled on the floor with the Holst's four-year-old son, Edvard, who also endeared himself to Yasser Arafat. From these meetings was born the Declaration of Principles, a flickering candle of Hope for a Palestinian homeland and the pivot for future peace plans. As we know in medicine, there are still relapses (like the Intifada) after remissions. But looking forward, rumbles of a concerted Palestinian nonviolent movement and Israeli moves towards disengagement are interesting signs. Even President George W Bush is paying more attention than just to Iraq.

Krysanja, our *SMA News* Editorial Manager, suggested I pen a light and fun Christmas editorial. It has turned out to be more reflective. I figured a story of a child bringing more Hope than Despair, even in the dark night of the soul, and in the face of seemingly unbreakable discrimination, must be as warming as a top grade single malt whisky, which the SMA President and 1st Vice President assure me, sadly a teetotaler, is Chicken Soup for the Soul. Merry Christmas and Happy New Year! ■

