

## Health Initiatives Can Help Peace Building in the Middle East

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**Description**

An article describes how health initiatives have led to Arab and Israeli cooperation in the Middle East.

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Newswise — An article published online by The Lancet today (Tuesday January 25, 2005) describes how health initiatives have led to Arab and Israeli cooperation in the Middle East. Issued by Udani Samarasekera, Press Officer, The Lancet Harvey Skinner (University of Toronto, Canada) and colleagues outline the work of the Canada International Scientific Exchange Program (CISEPO), which has successfully fostered collaborative work in the region involving Israeli, Jordanian and Palestinian health professionals since 1995.

In its first initiative CISEPO identified hearing loss as an important health issue for the region and helped broker the creation of the Middle East Association for Managing Hearing Loss (MEHA)—the first joint Arab and Israeli professional association.

The cross-border project led to Palestinian and Israeli basic science research programmes between **Bethlehem University and Tel Aviv University** in the genetics of hearing loss, and generated joint-publications. From this followed a project to screen and habilitate 17000 Israeli, Jordanian and Palestinian newborns for hearing loss.

CISEPO has now expanded from its initial focus on congenital hearing loss to include activities on health of mothers and children, promotion of health in young people, nutrition and infectious diseases. Overlapping components of these projects include co-authorship of presentation and papers, joint research meetings, international exchanges and training, visiting scholars, fellowships, continuing education, and electronic distance learning.

Professor Skinner comments: “Concern is mounting about our ability to address global health issues in the 21st century in a climate of national, ethnocultural, and religious conflicts. The Middle East, in particular, presents immense challenges for improving regional disparities in health and fostering peaceful coexistence.

“Our work has shown that it is possible to bring Arabs and Israelis together to achieve common goals under very difficult circumstances. From our experience, three essential ingredients for successful cooperation include a focus on common health needs with practical outcomes, a proactive and honest third party broker, and a critical mass of ‘bridge builders’ in the region who are prepared to get involved. The health sector provides a powerful venue for building international cooperation, trust and confidence. Our ongoing experience and model give direction for health professionals in peace building—a primary determinant of global health.”

In an accompanying commentary Samer Jabbour (American University of Beirut, Lebanon) raises the question of whether the health initiative reported by Skinner does contribute to peace.

Dr Jabbour states: “Building trust among a limited number of collaborators across lines of conflict is important. But making peace is much more than individual relations. Cooperative efforts must show a broader impact, especially when the politics of cooperation are so daunting, as in this case. A focus on the individual, rather than the collective, might be inadequate, not only in terms of impact but also participation. Although a few people can certainly change the world, only a critical mass of committed doctors with a common agenda can stand a chance in the face of the political deterioration in the Middle East.”