

Two Years and Counting

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Received: July 28, 2022

Published: September 19, 2022

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October 2019 marked the beginning of a turning point in the life of the Lebanese. It all started as nation-wide protests but what no one knew it was just the beginning; the beginning of a national revolution but also the trigger of an enormous avalanche of misfortunes and disasters. Nowadays we talk of the “Lebanon before October 2019” versus the “Lebanon after October 2019”. A huge discrepancy was installed between these two “Lebanon-s”. What used to be known as the “leading light of the East”, the “center of attraction of the MENA region”, became buried under many calamities. The country and its people were forced to face political corruption and an unprecedented financial crisis and economic recession, in a context of COVID pandemic, regional instability and continuous terrorist threat.

Two years ago, when the Lebanese thought that their country and situation could not get any worse, August 4th 2020 proved them wrong. A massive blast at the Beirut port, and not any blast, one of the largest non-nuclear explosions in history, demolished the capital of Lebanon, and with it the dreams and hopes of its people. Many casualties, innumerable injuries, and the topography of the city was forever altered. Countless buildings and houses were shattered, a myriad of homes was wrecked. The Beirut blast was the straw that broke the camel’s back, the last nail in the coffin.

Twenty-four months ago, all life sectors, whether economic, educational, banking, trading, political, administrative, agricultural, or touristic, were victim of this tragedy that drew the world’s attention. The health sector and in particular cancer patients, were no strangers to this harsh reality. Three major hospitals located at

the heart of the city, were directly hit and totally ruined and their patients were left with no place to go.

Fifty-two weeks ago, cancer patients began receiving one bullet after the other. Hospital places were limited for them to be admitted and hospitalized, and drugs were becoming missing. Despite many cries and shouts, despite persistent demands and calls, medications were still missing. One of the essences of the health sector was lacking. Patients saw their treatment sessions adjourned until their drugs became available. The scare is real. Diagnosed with cancer is one thing but being told that the treatment needed to cure and prolong life is missing is another blow to the face. Imagine telling a patient that they have cancer. Now imagine telling them that advances in science and medicine have resulted in an appropriate treatment. Finally, imagine telling them that their country’s problems have denied them the right to have access to this treatment. Imagine their facial expressions, try and understand their feelings, their anxiety, their breakdown.

Seven hundred and thirty days ago, the city that was renowned for its medical care, the capital that was welcoming thousands of patients from neighboring countries and from all the MENA region, became a graveyard to its own people. The place that brought hope to cancer patients turned into a long dark tunnel with no light at the end of it.

Seventeen thousand five hundred and twenty hours of worsening agony. The challenge began by finding the more “sophisticated” medications; immunotherapy and targeted biological agents were

no longer a necessity but a lavish luxury, a surplus. Next, basic chemotherapy medications went missing; this mere requirement became a scarcity. Patients who were responding very well to cancer treatment had their disease progress into more advanced and critical stages because of the interruption of their treatment. The odds for their cure and remission were getting more and more dismal.

One million fifty-one thousand and two hundred minutes of torture. Cancer patients have also been deprived of analgesics and pain killers. Morphine has become a fantasy, an illusion, an object of the outer space, of an unreal universe. Hopeless patients reached for alternative measures that weren't as effective or useful. Anti-emetics have also been in shortage; nausea that used to be easily controlled and prevented became an imposed fate to cancer patients, a struggle no one expected.

Sixty-three million and seventy-two thousand seconds of misery and no solution in the horizon. Different parties blaming one another for the people's despair. Politicians and authorities blaming banks which are referring back to the central bank which in turn is blaming fate for the devaluation of the Lebanese lira. Meanwhile cancer patients are losing hope and chances to survive.

Two years, twenty-four months, fifty-two weeks, seven hundred and thirty days, seventeen thousand five hundred and twenty hours, one million fifty-one thousand and two hundred minutes or sixty-three million and seventy-two thousand seconds have lapsed since the Beirut blast and the clock is still ticking. Yet the time has stopped for cancer patients who can no longer dream to have a healthy life, or simply live.

Conflicts of Interest

Both authors declare no conflicts of interest.