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PROFILES IN SCIENCE

Peace negotiations through science sideline of NCI director

Richard Klausner key figure in Middle East, Ireland cancer pacts

Although he wasn't exactly sure where he was, he knew, because someone told him, that he was being chauffeured north from Tel Aviv. It was night, yet he could see in the moonlight the nearly flat landscape along the road just to the east of the Mediterranean.

Sometimes Rick Klausner could catch a glimpse of a road marker with a name like Giv'atayim, or Bene Beraq. While it would not be unusual for the new director of the National Cancer Institute (NCI) to be in Israel, it was unusual for the director to be on an errand of this nature.

But he wasn't there solely because he was NCI director. Certainly that was a key element, but there was more to it. It had more to do with some people who crossed his path by chance and found themselves liking and respecting him and with a tragic event nearly a half a world away from his office on the National Institutes of Health (NIH) campus in Bethesda, Maryland.

The Middle East Cancer Consortium Board of Governors conducted their fifth annual meeting on March 6 in Bethesda. Shown seated from the left are Board Chairman Dr. Samir Al-Kayed of Jordan, NCI Director Dr. Richard Klausner, and Dr. Michael Silbermann, Executive Director of MECC. Other participants in the meeting (standing from left to right) were Professor Sherif Omar, Dean of the National Cancer Institute of Cairo, Dr. Joe Harford of the NCI, Professor Bracha Rager representing Israel, Dr. Charitini Komodiki representing Cyprus, Professor Amal S. Ibrahim representing Egypt, Dr. David O'Brien of the U.S. Agency for International Development, and Dr. Khamis El-Najjar representing the Palestinian Authority.

Right now he was on his way to host a dinner for a number of people who didn't like each other. Some would be afraid of others in the room. Nearly all distrusted everyone else who would be at the table. Quite possibly Klausner himself was not trusted by some. He had met only one of his guests, and him only once, socially.

They were being brought together by events they did not control. For Klausner, it had started really with a young woman, Efrat Rabinovich, a molecular biologist who volunteered to work in his lab. Over time, he had met her husband and a relationship of mutual respect had developed among the three.

The road to the mysterious dinner party began one evening when Rick was chief of the Cell Biology and Metabolism Branch at the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. He was at that time a well-respected scientist, but he was not yet NCI director.

Efrat's husband, Professor Itamar Rabinovich, now president of Tel Aviv University, was that evening still the Israeli Ambassador to the United States. Rabinovich recalls it this way: "I had to host a dinner in honor of the Israeli minister of health, Ephraim Sneth. One of the invited guests was Donna Shalala, the U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services. We thought we also should invite a scientist and physician. Who did we know and like? Rick Klausner would be the guest."

Klausner remembers that sometime during the course of that 1995 evening at Ambassador Rabinovich's residence the conversation got around to the Middle East peace talks and the fact that they were not going well. Eventually someone, maybe Rick, advanced the idea that perhaps the nations in the region would be willing to come together around science and a common enemy, cancer. It might be a small, but a positive step, it was said.

The idea surfaced that Rick should invite the health ministers and ambassadors of the nations involved in the unrest to come together at a dinner to discuss what could be done about cancer in the Middle East. And so Klausner did.

But not one official from any of the countries replied. In August 1995 Richard was sworn in as NCI director. Still, there was no response.

Then, on October 27, 1995, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated at the hand of a right-wing Israeli. The assassination was shocking and horrific in itself, but the idea that it was done by another Israeli made the event even more tragic, say Israeli scholars.

No one, least of all Klausner, knows why, but suddenly ambassadors and health ministers from every nation Rick had invited responded that they would attend the proposed dinner.

Thus, happenstance led to Richard Klausner kissing his wife and children good bye on Thanksgiving Day 1995 and flying nearly half a world away to take this ride north from Tel Aviv to host a dinner where the guests were at best distrustful of their table companions. Rick's wife quipped to him before he left that this was about the only excuse for his leaving home and hearth on Thanksgiving she couldn't argue with.

The car slowed as it entered the city of Herzliyya and gradually pulled up in front of the hotel where the dinner was to be held. Klausner recalls that dinner this way:

"At first it was hard to get them to focus on any kind of scientific consortium because there was so much animosity between them. So much distrust. They laid their feelings and often their anger with each other out on the table. They talked about why they didn't like or trust each other. I was not sure even with everyone at the table we would make any progress at bringing them together around science. It took time and about three or four attempts to get them to focus on the reason for the dinner. But once they did, we made great progress."

On May 20, 1996, the ministers of health of Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority formed an historic partnership at an official signing in Geneva, Switzerland. That intergovernmental body is known as the Middle East Cancer Consortium (MECC).

The aims of MECC, as described in NCI's last Congressional Budget Justification, are to increase knowledge about cancer and to decrease its burdens for the people of the Middle East. To date, MECC has funded through its Small Grants Program some 35 research projects conducted by scientists in the region. More than half the funds provided through this program have supported research projects involving more than one MECC signatory, thus encouraging and enabling scientific cooperation in the Middle East.

In a region where few countries maintain cancer registries, especially population-based registries and where cancer statistics are scarce, MECC's main areas of focus include cancer surveillance, information, and education.

The consortium also concentrates on training, basic research, enhancement of public health and patient care, quality control, and international communications. On the clinical side, cooperation can involve basic and applied research and can include programs to produce clinical guidelines and protocols. It is anticipated that membership in MECC will be expanded to include other countries in the region as the Middle East peace process expands.

NCI had a pivotal role in the creation of the Middle East Cancer Society, whose function is to encourage the region's researchers and oncologists to collaborate.

But the story doesn't end there. Someone came up with the idea that something similar should be done for Ireland, and Klausner and the folks at NCI again began work and shuttle negotiations. The result: On October 3, 1999, a collaboration similar to MECC was affected among Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, and the United States.

--Bradie Metheny

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