



WHO staff member Dr Abdelaziz Alahlafi meets Faris Hasan following his treatment for visceral leishmaniasis. Credit: WHO

7 October 2019 – Four-year-old Faris Hasan lives in Murzuq city in the south of Libya. Earlier this year, he began experiencing acute abdominal pain, accompanied by bouts of fever and vomiting. His condition grew worse and he rapidly lost weight. Doctors at the local clinic were unable to diagnose his illness and referred to him to the Children’s Hospital in Benghazi for further examination.

In early July, Faris was admitted to the hospital with fever, jaundice and an enlarged liver and spleen. Following a bone marrow biopsy, hospital doctors diagnosed him as suffering from visceral leishmaniasis.

Visceral leishmaniasis, also known as kala-azar, is caused by a parasite transmitted through the bite of infected female sandflies. The disease is characterized by irregular bouts of fever, substantial weight loss, swelling of the spleen and liver, and anaemia. If the disease is not treated, the case-fatality rate in developing countries can be as high as 100% within 2 years.

Outbreaks of visceral leishmaniasis are often fuelled by complex emergencies, mass population movements, famine and malnutrition. The disease is endemic in south Libya, and rates have been rising due to the country's prolonged crisis.

The most effective way to treat people with visceral leishmaniasis is with injections of sodium stibogluconate. Unfortunately, this treatment was not available anywhere in the country. Faris was put on an alternative treatment, but showed no improvement. His parents were in despair.

The hospital appealed to WHO for help. In September, WHO made an emergency purchase of sodium stibogluconate and rushed it to the hospital. Faris began treatment immediately and made a remarkable recovery. He has put on weight and has become a happy, mischievous little boy once again. He will remain under treatment for another 28 days until he is fully cured.

WHO has donated enough sodium stibogluconate to the hospital to treat 30 patients for up to one year. Professor Al Teer, Head of the hospital's Infectious Disease Department, thanked WHO for its support. "Thanks to this donation, we will be able to treat other patients like Faris whose long-term chances of survival would otherwise be slim."

Ms Elizabeth Hoff, the WHO Representative in Libya, said she was delighted that Faris had made such a speedy recovery. "We will continue to work with the Ministry of Health and hospitals and primary health care centres throughout Libya to fill critical gaps in medical supplies and make sure that vulnerable patients receive the care they need."

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