

Feature



THE EMERGENCY center will be able to hold up to 1,000 hospital beds, making it the largest such facility in Israel. (Nir Elias/Reuters)

## In the heart of battle

*In the event of war, the underground complex at Ichilov hospital's new state-of-the-art cardiac center can be transformed within 48 hours from a parking lot into a fully functioning emergency facility*

• By LIDAR GRAVE-LAZI

**T**el Aviv Sourasky Medical Center – otherwise known as Ichilov hospital – unveiled a state-of-the-art medical facility last week.

The Sammy Ofer Heart Medical Center covers an area of approximately 60,000 square meters, with a total of 13 floors above ground and a four-story underground emergency facility.

The cornerstone of the Heart building is the 18,000-sq.-m. underground complex, used routinely as a parking lot, but, in the event of war, able to transform within 48 hours into a fully functioning emergency center holding between 700 and 1,000 hospital beds.

"The rationale for this came during the Second Lebanon War, when there were threats of missiles coming to Tel Aviv and we were starting to look where we could evacuate patients to from the upper floors of the hospital. We had nowhere to evacuate them," explains hospital director Prof. Gabriel Barbash.

"Later we spoke with the IDF, and they said that the scenario for the next war would involve Tel Aviv as a target. So the decision was made to dedicate the underground floors of this new building – to let us have the option – to evacuate patients if there is a threat of rockets firing on Tel Aviv."

The emergency facility, the largest of its kind in Israel, provides protection against conventional, chemical and biological warfare. It is fully equipped with an air purification system, water reserves, electricity, oxygen and enough generators to power the facility independently for a number of days.

"Everything can be treated here, from internal medicine to any kind of surgical procedures. This level is in close proximity to the operating rooms so the patients can get all types of care, including neurosurgery – but underground," explains Barbash.

In fact, the new building connects to the operating

room theaters in the adjacent buildings through underground passages, enabling full use of emergency and operational facilities in wartime.

"We have a major facility which allows us to continue functioning even in the case of a direct attack," emphasizes the director. "I hope we will never have to use it, but we have to be prepared."

Construction of the Sammy Ofer Heart building began in February 2008 and took three years to complete at a total cost of \$110 million, with the underground facility costing \$30m.

This remarkable facility was able to come to fruition through a \$77m. donation by business tycoon Sammy Ofer to Ichilov, Rambam Medical Center in Haifa, and Soroka Medical Center in Beersheba; of which \$45m. was allocated to the construction of this building.

"We are private donors; the one who decides where to donate is Sammy Ofer, and my brother and I honor his contributions," said Ofer's son Eyal, on behalf of himself and his brother Avi, during a press tour of the facilities.

Of the additional funds, \$25m. came from donations abroad, and \$15m. was donated by Israeli businessmen, among them Nochi Dankner, Eliezer Fishman, David Goldfarb and Rami Unger. The Claims Conference also participated.

THE GOVERNMENT donated roughly \$10m., evoking criticism that private donations should not be needed to fund such a crucial endeavor. There has also been criticism of the large-scale donations that hospitals in the center of the country receive, in contrast to smaller hospitals in the periphery.

In response, Barbash contends that private donations are a necessity for any hospital, not just in Israel but throughout the world. And "thanks to the generous donation by Sammy Ofer, the government only

had to provide NIS 32m. and could therefore allocate more funds to hospitals in the periphery."

While the new Tel Aviv medical complex is the largest of its kind, other hospitals are being built with the same concept in mind.

"There is another hospital like this in the North, near the border, and two more hospitals with underground facilities are being built, including an even larger complex in Haifa, to allow its functioning under attack, adds Barbash, noting "the beginning of a new trend." It is a new policy of the Health Ministry to allow each major hospital such a facility.

If the underground facility is meant to provide smooth operations during wartime, the part at ground level is more than equipped to handle medical care in peacetime.

The new Heart building includes the hospital's cardiology center, with units for treating the heart, blood vessels and brain; the neurology center, and two internal medicine wards, which will be relocated from the old buildings, offering improved conditions for patients.

In fact, the new glass-encased, cube-shaped building feels more like a boutique hotel than a hospital. The lobbies are decorated with pictures of old Tel Aviv, and the passageways – painted bright red to resemble blood vessels – impart an ultra-modern feel.

The rooms are spacious, holding only two patients per room, and each room is decorated with scenic pictures, from fields of flowers to lush forests.

"These facilities improve upon the conditions of those in the older building and really give respect to the patient," Barbash concludes.

President Shimon Peres attended the unveiling ceremony on March 9, albeit prematurely. The ministry has still not officially signed off on the opening of the new building, but it is only a matter of time before this new facility is put to much-needed use.