

The Shreveport Times

Palestinian patient with brain tumor travels half a world to use expert Shreveport surgeon



Written by
[Michael Doughty](#)
March 7, 2014

Shreveport, LA – Sawsan Asbah, a lifelong resident of Ramallah, Palestine, never expected to come to the United States, much less Shreveport, but the onset of a severe medical condition and a timely connection with stateside charity efforts recently brought her to north Louisiana for emergency brain surgery to save her life.

Surrounded by family, she was a little disoriented but all smiles recently in her bed at University Health Shreveport following the successful surgery on Feb. 26.

“I felt it’s all with God’s help; we arranged everything and I came over here,” Asbah said. “I’m really thankful for everyone who helped, they are great people.”

Her symptoms first began back home in in January. It started with dizziness and headaches, which quickly became crippling; Asbah was unable to live a normal life. That’s when local physicians were consulted.

Dr. Fayeze Shamieh, a dedicated neurologist who practices in Lake Charles was visiting the region through the organization Physicians for Peace, and was asked by a Palestinian neurologist to consult on Asbah’s case.

“I go make a trip twice a year to the area of the Holy Land, so this time we were there in the middle of January, and we visited Sawsan and her family at her home,” Shamieh said. “We ordered an MRI to the brain and shockingly found out she had a massive tumor in her brain.”



Sawsan Asbah, who is recovering at University Health Hospital after having a brain tumor removed Feb. 26th spends time with her family. / Jim Hudelson/The Times

Shamieh recognized the severity of Asbah's condition, and quickly contacted his friend and colleague with University Health Shreveport, Dr. Anil Nanda.



Khader Asbah kisses the hand of his wife, Sawsan Asbah, who is recovering at University Health Hospital after having a brain tumor removed Feb. 26th. The family came to Shreveport from Ramallah, a Palestinian city in the central West Bank for the surgery. / Jim Hudelson/The Times

"He suggested I take pictures of the MRI and text him the pictures, within five minutes we connected," Shamieh said. "I asked him 'what do you think?' and he said 'it needs to be resected, and I'm willing to do it.'"

Nanda even offered to waive the surgical fee to lessen the cost for the Asbah family.

"It was just one of those acts of kindness we all should do," Nanda said. "A brotherhood exists; we're here to help; and

we should help each other, because we're only on this planet a short time and if we can help someone, that's a profound blessing."

Asbah had the option to undergo the surgery in the west bank area of Ramallah, or travel to either Tel Aviv or the Hadassa medical center in Jerusalem or fly to Shreveport. She first visited a local expert, who believed the surgery to remove the tumor would be too difficult to undertake.

Shamieh recommended Sawsan undergo the surgery in Shreveport, under the care of Nanda, who Shamieh considers to be the best neurosurgeon in the world.

Chairman and professor of the Department of Neurosurgery at LSU Health Shreveport, and a member of the World Federation of Neurosurgery with more than 2000 brain tumor removals under his belt, Nanda, backed by an expert team of supporting nurses and physicians at University Health, has garnered renown in his field.

With the help of Shamieh and Nanda, University Health worked with the Asbah family to help lessen the cost of the procedure. At the lower rate, the family was able to afford the surgery and flights to bring Sawsan and her family from Ramallah to Shreveport.

"We were really far away so once we heard the news, we were traumatized," Asbah's daughter and Montreal, Canada, resident, Nathalie Asbah said. "When I heard, I wanted to go back, but then we decided for her to come to the U.S. and I had to apply for a U.S. visa, but I'm really glad I made it and was able to spend some time with mom before the surgery."

Family members tensely waited as Nanda removed the tumor, utilizing a now common surgical method, which LSU Health helped establish as standard years ago.

“We made an incision behind her hairline, so we didn’t have to shave her head, and cut a small hole in the skull using a computer assisted system,” Nanda said. “The whole procedure took less than an hour and a half.”

Nanda and Shamieh believe the nearly apple-sized tumor is benign, but to be safe, the hospital ordered a biopsy to determine if Asbah will require radiation treatment.

“We are waiting on the final pathology to know if she can go home or she needs additional treatment,” Nanda said. “If she needs a follow up and another MRI, all of that can be done long distance, I can take a look at the results and take it from there.”

Asbah’s daughter Nathalie and niece Nimara Asbah, also of Montreal stayed awake the entire night of Asbah’s surgery and post-surgery recovery.

“I was more stressed than any other situation,” Nimara said. “Especially when it’s the first time you’ve been in such a situation, you’re always awake to hear whatever happens, especially the people close to the family.”

Though the surgery was swift, Asbah’s family agonized while they waited.

“I was scared,” Nathalie said. “When people are scared they sometimes get bad thoughts, even though they shouldn’t.”

Asbah’s husband and brother, lifelong residents of Ramallah, traveled with her to be by her side through the entire procedure. Both men spoke only Arabic, but their daughters translated their thanks for the physicians and nurses who helped make Asbah healthy again.

“They were really happy and they said thank God, we made it to the end and thanks to the surgeon and the hospital,” Nathalie Asbah said, translating for Khader Asbah. “They would like to thank Dr. Shamieh and Dr. Nanda for everything they have done and all of the visitors who came, the Arabic people they have known from Palestine who immigrated here and they haven’t seen them for years who came and spent the whole time with them during the surgery.”



Khader Asbah, his wife, Sawsan Asbah, who is recovering at University Health Hospital after having a brain tumor removed Feb. 26th and Bader Asbah, a brother-in-law, walk in a hallway at the hospital recently. The family came to Shreveport from Ramallah, a Palestinian city in the central West Bank for the surgery. / Jim Hudelson/The Times

It was a great relief for everyone when Sawsan opened her eyes and smiled at the dozen family and friends who waited by her side.

“You should have seen all of our faces, they turned around 180 degrees,” Nathalie said. “People can see her and everyone is sitting up and everyone is laughing, it’s as if nothing ever happened.”

Many of Sawsan’s family members will be returning to Palestine, but Asbah will stay in the West for a few more weeks, until she is fully ready for the more than 12-hour flight home.

“We’re going to go back to Montreal and wait for mom to recover; after she can travel she will come spend time with us in Canada until she’s fully recovered and gets back all her strength, then she will go to Palestine,” Nathalie said.

For the entire Asbah family, the prospect of a healthy Sawsan is beyond joyful. Their smiles and words of thanks were as heartfelt as the tears of joy shed at seeing Sawsan’s tired, but bright smile.

“I was really surprised when we were in Shreveport, I was not expecting to find friends and family were willing to stay the whole time with us,” Nathalie said. “Right before the surgery and until now, visitors kept on coming and I’m really glad for some of the people we met, to us as strangers, they were beside us more than family.”

Both Nathalie and Nimara thanked the attending nurses for their kindness and patience.

“The treatment they gave her and the way they treat her was amazing,” Nimara said. “I just wish them luck in everything in their lives.”