



Neglected to death

By [Gideon Levy](#)

About an hour's drive from Tel Aviv, within the borders of the State of Israel and not in the territories, live thousands of women and children without health insurance. National health insurance for all the residents of the country? The articles in the UN Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights - to which Israel is a signatory - concerning the guarantee of medical treatment? Drive, for example, to the city of Rahat in the Negev. There reside hundreds of women, together with their children, who live without any health insurance, and suffer from illnesses without any chance of being cured. They neglect their illnesses, because of their economic distress, do not reach the doctor or the hospital in time, and sometimes pay with their lives for their poverty and for their lack of civil status, which prevents them from receiving proper medical care.

They married natives of Israel, citizens of the state; some of them are second and third wives to their husbands, who practice bigamy and polygamy, which are prohibited by law. But since the new cruel and draconian Citizenship Law was legislated, they are all prevented from attaining any status at all in their old-new country. Every new immigrant, whether Jewish, possibly Jewish or totally non-Jewish, immediately has a right to medical insurance upon his arrival, but not they. Most of these women were born to families of refugees, who were expelled or fled from here in 1948. They are also natives of Israel, who were born and grew up in the territories, married Bedouin or Israeli Arabs, but are not entitled to "family reunification," according to the new law that prevents them from doing so.

So they live here, raise their children, foreigners in their own land, illegal in their birthplace, and their path to medical care is blocked. Nobody is certain of their exact numbers. The Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) organization estimates their number in the thousands, no less. Thus diabetes patient Salha Abu Jamus died in Rahat, after neglecting her illness for months, for lack of means, and thus breast cancer spread in the body of Najah al-Kadi, and only recently, after a stubborn and dedicated legal struggle, did the PHR manage to arrange chemotherapy treatments for her, shamefully late. Concerning her treatment, the senior oncologist in Beilinson Hospital in Petah Tikva, Dr. Salomon Stemmer, wrote in his medical opinion last month: "She did not undergo any examination for metastasis, due to her lack of economic means. We decided on hormone treatment because of the circumstances - lack of insurance and lack of money to pay for chemotherapy. This treatment is not usual for a young woman with advanced breast cancer, but it is being administered for lack of choice, due to the fact that she could not afford chemotherapy, with all its complications and costs. There is no question that her life hangs in the balance, and that the lack of proper checkups and the failure to administer the usual and proper treatment are liable to shorten her life."

In the State of Israel in 2006, women live, fall ill and die because of a lack of medical insurance and the economic means necessary to be cured.

For our information: The next time Israel organizes a delegation with a field hospital for victims of a disaster in a distant country, we would do well to remember that here, under our jurisdiction, there are people who sometimes do not receive life-saving treatment.

Najah al-Kadi is a large and attractive woman, with dark skin. She is 32 years old, and was born in the Nusseirat refugee camp in Gaza, to a Bedouin family that originated in the Be'er Sheva region. About five years ago she married an Israeli citizen, Sakr al-Kadi, 55, one of the original residents of Rahat, who served as a tracker in the Israel Defense Forces for about five years. Sakr voted for the Labor Party all his life, now he will vote for Kadima, as a good citizen. Najah's brother and sister were also born in Israel, at a time when their poverty-stricken mother was working as a laborer in a factory in Rehovot. Once she gave birth in Kaplan Hospital in Rehovot, and once in a field in the south of the country. Najah is Sakr's second wife, after he divorced the first one, with whom he has grown children and grandchildren.

About 20 months ago, Najah felt a big lump in her right breast. For about a year she neglected it, because she could not afford to see a doctor. The couple lives from income supplements - about NIS 1,500 a month - received by Sakr, who is unemployed and ill. The lump steadily grew, and Najah began to suffer from pain. She traveled to Dahariya in the territories, to the cheapest doctor in the area. He sent her to undergo tests, she tried to have them done in Noran, a small private medical center in Rahat, but they didn't have the suitable equipment. The lymph nodes in her underarm steadily swelled, her pains intensified. She also suffers from asthma, uses an inhalator, and lives in a tiny, damp hut in Neighborhood 20, two small rooms whose walls are moldy from the damp; the bathroom has no door.

In the end, she turned to Soroka Medical Center in Be'er Sheva. She paid NIS 1,560 from her own pocket for a CAT scan, a fantastic sum for the couple; she had to pay another NIS 1,800 for a biopsy, a sum they didn't have. In her distress, she turned to the Yedid organization, which sent her to Physicians for Human Rights, and there she found Orly Alami, the PHR coordinator of the project dealing with the unrecognized villages in the Negev, which also deals with women in the recognized villages who lack status. The organization arranged a series of tests for Najah free of charge, in Sheba Hospital at Tel Hashomer and in Beilinson, where invasive breast cancer was diagnosed, and she received hormone treatments, which are relatively cheap and not appropriate to her condition, in the opinion of Dr. Stemmer.

Salah Abu Jamus' fate was even more cruel. She is 41 years old, born in the Shabura refugee camp in Rafah. After being married in Dahaniyeh, in Gaza, she was divorced by her husband and fled to Israel, for fear of his family. Here she lived for a while in Segev Shalom, until she met Hamdan al-Kamlat, 64, from Rahat, and married him. She is his third wife; he is officially divorced from one of his two wives, but in recent years he has been living only with Salah. They also lived solely from guaranteed income allowances. Salah became pregnant, but last February she aborted in Soroka. During the examinations, they diagnosed diabetes. The doctors recommended treatment, but for lack of insurance and of money, Salah refrained for months from going to the doctor and treating her diabetes.

In May she lost consciousness, and was hospitalized at Soroka. Up until November she did not take insulin, the staff of life for diabetes patients. In November they were forced to amputate her foot, and through the welfare department in Soroka, she finally began to receive insulin.

She was confined to a wheelchair; there was no point in discussing a prosthesis and rehabilitation for her amputated leg. Nor was there any point in discussing temporary residency, because of her husband's polygamy. On December 15, a black wound was discovered on her other foot, and she began to cough and her temperature rose. A volunteer doctor from PHR decided over the phone that she had to be sent to a hospital urgently. After her condition stabilized, she was released from the hospital with a recommendation for a continuation of the treatment. But Salah could not afford "continuation of the treatment." On December 24 she lost consciousness. She was rushed to the emergency room in Soroka, and died the next day. Hamdan al-Kamlat, the widower, sighs. He is almost totally deaf.

What is a room here, and what is a yard? Who is the first wife, who is the second, and who is the third? The home of Ayesha Hasnat, Neighborhood 20, Rahat. A pile of boards, planks, asbestos and fabric attempt somehow to give the place the appearance of a home. Everything is open to the winds and the rain. Ragged children run around barefoot on the cold, damp concrete floor. The tattered laundry is fluttering in the rain. This is the home of the widow and orphans of Hareb al-Abid, who died a few weeks ago. Two wives from Gaza, a wife from Egypt and a wife from Jordan: It is not clear whom he divorced legally, and whom he did not. He managed before his death to sign the IOU for the chemotherapy treatment of Najah al-Kadi, the neighbor with cancer. Ayesha Hasnat, his Gazan wife, has six children. She has been here for 14 years, without papers, without medical insurance for herself and for two of her six children, who were not born here. For the second wife, Hiyam from Jordan, the husband submitted a request for family reunification, but he died before receiving a reply. Now she is here with her children, too. She has been suffering from headaches for three years, and has never visited a doctor.