

UROLINK TRIP to IRAQI KURDISTAN 2007-05-07

Two days before I left on 10th May there was a suicide bomb in the Ministry of Interior in Erbil, killing about 15 people, numerous injured. This fact was on the BBC news, known to me and a few others friends, including my sister, but not Ruth or at least she never said. This is the first reported bombing since 2004. My ticket was booked so I went, kindly driven to Heathrow by my daughter Ruth at 2am in the morning !! Uneventful flight by Austrian Airways and no excess baggage. Bless them. The security at Heathrow is such that despite being there 3 hours before takeoff I had no time to get my duty frees, so no Hamlets. Changed in Vienna, a rush, as flight delayed, so hobbled [a bit lame from OA of the left ankle] to the other end of the airport just made it to the Erbil flight. The security was tight there, I got a visa [no charge] and was whisked off in an ambulance to a parking area about half a mile away where I was met by a delightful young doctor, Robwar Ahmed, from the Ministry of Health and deposited in the Dim Dim hotel, [which of course in Welsh means the NO NO hotel] not bad but no lifts as no electricity. In the evening I met with the 2 urologists Dr Pishtewen and Dr Mohammed Suhaid, and the newer transplant surgeon from Baghdad, Dr Shawkri Ghaza, there had been 2 live related transplants that day [weekend in Iraq but they operate on their day off]. Dr Suhaid was delighted with the vascular clamps etc which I had managed to secure at great haste just before I left. I had dinner with the new Minister of Health Dr Zryan, his partisan name from the days when he was a Kurdish resistance against Saddam Hussain, in the late 80s. He has been in the UK since, as a cardiologist, returning now his country is free, his son is still in the UK as a medical student, his wife and other 3 children are with him in Erbil. He was effusive in his praise for Tony Blair and thought well of George W so I tempered my comments on them, but it must be said the Kurds are the only Iraqi's who have fared well in the last 4 years. The delightful doctor who met me then drove me around the sights in the dark!! to find a packet of cigars and the where withal to use a mobile, which he had lent me for the duration. They are so hospitable that he would not accept payment. I must find him a present. I phoned Ruth to say I had arrived, to find that Stan, the new pup, had eaten a load of ibuprofen, had been given an emetic, at vast expense, from the vet and she needed monies transferring to pay !! All sorted next day. Amazing how we can now all keep in contact even in far flung places. Stan OK by the way.

The next day I went to Sulamania, to the Babylon Hotel run by Christians so a bar, electricity but again no lift!! I found a shop nearby which sold café crèmes[cigarillos] so now happy, the young man in the shop is from Cardiff, visiting family, and he runs the best Kurdish restaurant there, his words, I will try it to confirm. Dr Mohammed Seido trainee urologist, had come to Sulamania from Duhok to make sure I was safe, it was lovely to see him.

Met with Dr Ishmael in the evening and planned the next few days.

Sunday 13th.

First the daily meeting with all the doctors of the previous days admissions. I was welcomed as an old friend.

Operating list in the University teaching hospital
RIH,

Pyelolithotomy

2 ureteric stones treated by ureteroscopy and lithoclast cystoscopy and urethrotomy
Now they have much improved equipment and endoscopy skills using the teaching video stack and the registrars are allowed to treat patients under supervision,

I was taken to the Freedom Park in the late afternoon by Dr Ali and a colleague. Very pretty, lovely flowers and good ice creams. They are anxious to have more skills and wish to attend courses in the developing world but money to pay is difficult they only earn \$300 a month, I think Urolink should take the skills courses there. I have proved it is safe to go, to hell with what the Foreign Office, who say it is not.

Monday 14th May

Operating list Nephrolithotomy, difficult due to hydrocalycosis, multiple stones removed by radial incisions Hydrocele [baby] circumcision [baby] done by Dr Ishmael, he is a beautiful surgeon RIH adult

2 double J stents, 1 cystoscopy

1 vesical calculus [crushed]

There are 3 theatre operating spaces 2 in one room and the speed of the anaesthetists is impressive. I saw a few difficult cases to deal with in the next 3 days, watch this space.

In the afternoon Dr Kallender [general surgeon] took me for a meal at his lovely house and then visited his farm which he is planting with fruit trees. Wonderful. This place is buzzing, building all over the place but it is getting expensive to live as there are so many people of Iraqi origin coming up from the south.

Dr Kallender's wife at their small holding



Dr Ismaeel doing circumcision

Tuesday 15th may

I gave a talk on the surgery of Peyronies' to the now large urology department, 13 specialists and loads of trainees, a far cry from 2002 when there were 3.

I gave the department a load of equipment including a 30 degree Storz telescope from Alan McNeil in Edinburgh. Received gratefully they had only a 0 and 70 degree.

There were 2 PNLs to do today. I checked their equipment which was Storz and good but found they no Amplatz tube, fortunately I had brought one with me. It took a while to sort out the Xray C arm and the table and then we were off. They have not done one before so I decided to show them how to puncture the lower calyx which I managed on 2 occasions but failed to get a satisfactory guide wire in. So we converted to open surgery. The second case

was a well dilated system which we managed to get into and remove the stone. This was great a first for Sulamania. Dr Hussein [urologist] who has come up from Baghdad made a brilliant radiologist at the last moment, magic on the C arm.



The team doing the PNL and stone

We finished mid afternoon I spent the rest of the day in the hotel resting. I managed to buy a bottle of Red Label for 25 dollars. Why is whisky cheaper here than in the UK.

Wednesday 16th May

Attended the daily hospital surgery meeting and then theatre with Dr Ismaeel who asked me to assist him with a case of dubious gender whom I saw 2 years ago and decided he should be male. He has been on testosterone and is now definitely male and needs a urethroplasty for his perineal hypospadias, he now has a reasonable phallus. He seems to have waited for my return



perineal hypospadias and repair

Another pleasant lazy afternoon reading emails I am getting to like this hotel but my laundry came back unironed, at least washed !!!

Thursday 17th

No official operating list today, trying to fit in a Mainz II on an extremely incontinent woman whom I saw 2 years ago, again waiting for me to return. When I did a vaginal examination there was no vagina at all her bladder was being used as one and the ureters were blinking at me near the vaginal, so called, entrance. There was no space in the

emergency theatre and anyhow not an emergency. Dr Ahmed will try and get a space in a private hospital. I visited the Dean of the medical school with Dr Ismaeel and told him of the great improvements that had occurred. Then to the new dialysis unit the two doctors there both urologists, they have 50 dialysis patients to treat. They visited Sheffield a year ago to learn how to set up the unit and they are doing well. They could do with some nephrology input. I had the rest of the day free till 6.30 pm when I went to do the Mainz II in the private hospital which finished at 9.30pm, I was offered a \$1000 for doing the operation but declined. I said Dr Ahmed who assisted me and who is looking after the patient post op should have \$500. Then a lovely meal in a restaurant with Dr Ismaeel and friends.

Two weeks late she went home dry and happy.

Friday 18th

Travelled to Duhok set off at the ungodly hour of 7 am. Lovely scenery, fairly green. We went along the border of the Kurdish area and the rest of Iraq. Bristling with army and police. No one asked me for my passport!!! But all cars were examined underneath with mirrors. They are at least trying.

Staying at the rather posh Jiyan Hotel 5 star as the Sulav where I usually stay has a flyover being built by it. Met with Dr Shakir and discussed the next weeks programme.

Saturday 19th

I am pleasantly pleased how well the internet works. Quicker than at home even though I am on broadband there. My daughter Ruth has sent me 2 and my sister and friends have kept in contact.

We did an extensive ward round and clinic with some really interesting cases for the next 3 days before I examine the final year medical students for MB Ch B from Wednesday onwards.

I met with Prof Farhad [dean of the medical school] who has been the victim of identity theft. I had an email from him 2 weeks ago saying he was stuck in Lagos and needed \$ 3,000 to get out, he was no where near there!!! I had asked the person who sent the email what the name of his driver was and he could not answer so I never sent the money. Prof Farhad has changed his email !!!! . I went with 2 Canadians, one a Kurd Dr Azer and Lynne Foster [from the International Society for Peace and Human Rights] to a refugee camp 10 Km outside Duhok to see Turkish Kurds who are not allowed back into Turkey and the Iraqis are trying not to assimilate into their society so that they go back. Dr Azer saw the patients with one of the Kurdish GPs and I dished out the pills with help of Lynne and examined the female abdomens. There was a lot of misery but they reasonably well fed and dressed and had TVs.

Sunday 20th May

Good operating list. Six cases. I personally did an optical urethrotomy on a patient on whom they had failed twice, but then they are relatively new at the technique. I used my own scope which is better than theirs. It is nice to know I can still do it. Also an adult patient with perineal hypospadias [2 previous urethroplasties] with a marked chordee which I released as this was his bigger complaint, he will need a buccal mucosal graft later to get a urethra.

I went with Mohamed Seido again, the lad who came to Sulaymania to check I was OK and whom I have met the last 2 visits, with his 5 year old daughter to the Dream Park, apart from her falling off a swing it was an ideal afternoon, just so peaceful and normal, there is a nasty war going on not far away.

Dr Shakir asked me to assist him with a private radical prostatectomy at 10pm but I declined. I can't cope at that time of night, they finished at 4 am. What are they doing operating so late?

Monday 21st May

This was a huge list with 3 operating theatres. 2 PNLs, one well done by Dr Shakir who is becoming expert. The other was abandoned because of anaesthetic difficulties. Loads of scopes, open prostate, hypospadias repair and then I did a Lue procedure on a diabetic with an extremely bent penis ventrally.

Then a peaceful evening in the hotel. Everyone else went to bed exhausted.

Tuesday 22nd May

2 cases for me; rectus fascial sling on an obese patient with stress incontinence and a cystoscopy a lady with UTIs and enuresis.

Then gave a lecture on Urogynaecology well attended by the Gynaecologists I was discussing mainly how to avoid urinary injuries in Gynaecological surgery and VVFs. I was mainly discussing the need for the gynaes to recognise that these occur and to learn techniques to avoid injuries.

Lunch [very good] with Prof Farhad and family and some of the gynaecologists. One of them was critical about the difficulty of allowing Kurds into the UK even for short visits. I explained we had Europeans to let in, then Commonwealth personnel before all the rest of the world and any how Kurdistan was an up and coming place, full of enthusiasm so people should be coming back not going away.

I don't think she was convinced!!

Wednesday 23rd May

The final exams started today for MB ChB I was doing the long cases with 2 others, a general surgeon and a vascular surgeon I thought the standard very acceptable, the English was also pretty good in these final year students.

Then at 4 pm I went for a picnic to Bedol, a lovely sheltered watery place about 30 kms from Duhok to the north east, with Mohammed and 5 other trainee urologists. The men here also do the barbeques won't let the women near. We had great meat including heart, liver and kidneys, scrumptious. Then when it was nearly dark at 9 pm they stated dancing, Kurdish style. Not a drop of alcohol taken, except by me, 2 cans of beer, but they seem to get high on just good spirits. Lovely day and evening I felt blessed to be amongst such great youngsters in this beautiful place.

Thursday 24th May

Today I was doing orals on operative surgery and principles of surgery with 2 others. I stuck to mainly urology, general and orthopaedic surgery done by the other 2. Half hour per student, from 8.30 am to 2 pm No break but lots of coffee !! exhausting but very worthwhile. Good standard but they are not exposed enough to the operating theatres.

Lunch with Seimans who have just installed a new CAT scanner in the Emergency Hospital and Dr Abdullah, [Director of Duhok Medical Services] Prof Farhad, Dr Shakir amongst others. I found out at lunch there is a smoking ban in the Azadi Teaching Hospital so I told Dr Abdullah that there had been no signs [not that I could read anyhow] no one had actually told me or told me off and more important there were ashtrays all over the place even in the doctors room in theatre!!!!. Still good they are taking notice.

Friday 25th May

Examined short cases today. Then lunch at Dr Shakir's new very nice house, sat on floor to eat which I had difficulty getting down to and up from. Then a visit with Mohammed and a paediatric trainee Basim Rashid to the Lalash region to see the Azidi temples, a religion older than Christianity They have a god but no devil. Handy. Fascinating day back via a fish dinner and then went to meet Mohammed's parents at 10.30 at night, normal time for visiting !!

Sat 26th May. Last day of exams, orals again. There was a resit who was appalling and arrogant with it but otherwise good students.

Final lunch with Dr Shakir and Abdullah they gave me a gold necklace and bracelet very generous. I had bought Mohammed a tape of 'West Life' for the car as he has ferried me everywhere, what a kind young man. Saw Khaled who was Prof Farhad's driver when I first went in 2002 and was the man who went shopping for clothes for me all those years ago, he is now a librarian. Good move up, slight change from driver.

Then driven to Erbil late afternoon back to the Dim Dim, no electricity again so sweltering. I had a cold shower to cool down, after 3 hours it was on again with the air conditioning. Joy. Saw Dr Robwar again and gave him a tape of Enrique Iglesias, [dishy grandson of irrigating resectoscope fame], which I had bought in Duhok, he loves it.

Sun 27th May

Ward round then sorted out cases for the week Lectured the trainees for 1hour in the evening, there are 10 of them the unit is expanding fast. Dreadfully hot.

Monday 28th May

Showed Dr Mohammed Suhaib how to do a colposuspension, there was other open and endoscopy cases as well. I checked the equipment to do the first PNL here on Thursday. Saw a man with post priapism impotence, his penis did not feel that fibrosed so I gave him ic papaverine [I have run out of caverject] with a reasonable result and told him to try at home, if he fails I will give a prosthesis on Thursday.

Lectured the trainees at 5 pm well attended. Bright lads, they want another tutorial tomorrow.

Tuesday 29th May

More operating I am fairly impressed with the open surgery but they have not kept up with endoscopy except for Kameron, the theatre scrub nurse, who is expert at ureteroscopy and optical urethrotomy, much better than the trainees and most of the specialists.

Another tutorial, word has got around and I had the paediatric surgical trainees as well. I am beginning to like the Dim Dim [when the electricity on]. In Erbil there is only 3 hours a

day of electricity for the general public from the government, then there are extra generators for the evening paid for by each individual, if they can afford, usually off at 1 am so everyone is suffering at night from the heat. This city numbers now 2 million many from the rest of Iraq, it is suffering from expanding too fast, poor water supply and sewage very bad. Amazing amount of building and roadworks so plenty of work for everyone. Didn't we do well at the cricket, poor Windies. Have BBC World in the Dim Dim when electrics on!!!!

Wednesday 30th May

Live non related transplant today these cases are vetted by a medical board and no money should change hands but I suspect it does. Some problem with the arterial anastomosis but ends up fine with the kidney pu-ing.
Lovely lunch with the whole transplant and urology team including theatre staff, thanks to Dr Pishtewen.

Met with Bazhad Koye, who first persuaded me to come here in 2002 and who has been in the UK [Middlesbrough as consultant] for many years till his wife had a bad car accident. He is now back in his own country with his family. He is doing private work as there are no spaces in the Government departments at the moment. Pity. He would be a good trainer in Endourology for the numerous completely untrained trainee urologists. Please to say his wife is recovering well.

Thursday 31st May

The PNL case was unsuitable and the post-priapism man is going great guns on ic papaverine so no cases for me, hope he doesn't get another priapism !!
I was watching a 90 year old man having his retained catheter removed when he spoke to me in broken English, he was in UK during WW 2 and started ranting against the Germans. I am still depressed that they are doing optical urethrotomies and rigid cystoscopies without any anaesthesia after all these years. Erbil is well behind the other centres on this score and also in endoscopy training, although they think they are the best, and they are in other things, like transplantation.

Friday free day went to a park with Dr Ammer the minaret is dated 1190 AD free packed with people

Sat, 2nd to Mon 4th

More examinations for 3 days, well organised, great short cases including submandibular swelling/tumour. I had to search deep in my memory for that. Gave last lecture to trainees on Ethics in Surgery including female patient confidentiality, not high on their priorities.
The colposuspension lady had her catheter out also dry and happy
After getting what I thought were some beds and operating time for Bahzad he declined, so that was a waste of time.
The Kurdish urological association suggested 2 years ago has yet to materialise but it looks hopeful
Left for home in the afternoon of the 4th June with Dr Shakir, picked up by Ruth at heathrow and then drove to north Wales in bed 3 am knackered.

Thanks to:

Urolink for the fare to Erbil £750

To the 3 universities in Sulamania, Duhok and Erbil. My hotel and keep was all taken care of. I could not even buy cigars [only alcohol!!]

To the urologists in all three places especially Dr Ismeel. Dr Shakir and Dr Pishtewen and Dr Mohammed Suhaib for their kindness and courtesy.

To the lads who ferried me [in the text]

To DHL who sent the equipment over to Erbil

To Jean Buckley who raises money for Urolink and the friends in Llanarmon who buy all the raffle tickets etc

This was a great trip I will go once more late next year before I hang up my boots. I need persons to come over with me to do courses on Ca prostate, endourology interventional radiology and paediatric surgery Any takers ***It is safe***

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There are no photos of the end of the trip I managed to delete them from my camera