

Books with Wings Project Set to Soar From Toronto to Gul Bahar

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Landlocked and mountainous, Afghanistan has suffered from such unremitting conflict and instability in recent times that its economy, political infrastructure and social fabric lie in ruins. The devastation extends to the nation's universities and libraries. Renowned for its influential intellectual contributions during the Middle Ages, the nation now struggles for access to even the most basic resources.

The walls of its largest medical school library, the Kabul Medical Institute Library, are riddled with bullet holes. A humanitarian effort to replenish the library was initiated in 2002 by Dr. Richard Gordon, a radiologist at the University of Manitoba. It developed into a class project sponsored by the Manitoba Medical Students Association in the fall of 2003. As word of the ambitious project spread, it garnered the support of the Canadian Federation of Medical Students, a group representing thirteen medical schools in Canada including the University of Toronto.

The dire situation of medical students in Afghanistan motivated many across Canada, from students to practicing physicians, to donate their used medical textbooks. As University of Manitoba medical student and one of the project's co-directors, Kevin Warrian, said, "Medical school is tough at the best of times...we can only struggle to imagine what it's like to learn these subjects without even the core textbooks."

This past year, numerous volunteers from across the country, including medical students, librarians, residents and physicians, collected 1,700 medical textbooks that were shipped by the Canadian Armed Forces to Kabul Medical Library. This effort succeeded in amassing more than double the projected goal of 600 books. The retail value of the textbooks is estimated to be \$250,000. The books, which span the basic sciences and all of the major medical subspecialties, are desperately needed by Afghan medical faculty and students. This includes a large cohort of female medical students who are now able to resume their education after the removal of Taliban-imposed restrictions.

The training of indigenous doctors is a critical step towards Afghanistan regaining stability and a measure of self-sufficiency. "If educating the people of Afghanistan is going to be the priority to help work through the war, then you're going to have to provide them the resources to facilitate their education, so that's the primary goal," said student Vishal Anand, executive member of the University of Alberta's International Healthcare Initiatives for

Medical Students (IHIMS).

Dr. Cheragh Ali, Dean of the Kabul Medical Institute, said that he was overwhelmed by the efforts of the volunteers and by the good will that the project has generated. The project is widely being hailed as an international friendship initiative between Canada and Afghanistan and it has received positive media coverage in Western Canada.

This year, the U of T chapter of the initiative known locally as the "Books with Wings Project" hopes to take the torch from its colleagues in Manitoba and spearhead the organization of another shipment of books to Afghanistan.

This time the books are slated for the medical library at Al Beeruny University in Gul Bahar, two hours north of Kabul. The university was established during the war because of strong local demand from students who were unable to attend school in Kabul. Shira Taylor, co-director of the U of T chapter, visited Al Beeruny University this past summer and encountered students studying bereft of even the basics. Many faculty members at Al-Beeruny commute to campus from Kabul and work as volunteers because there is little funding available to pay their salaries. The entire medical library only consists of about forty books and faculty members and students struggle without any other teaching materials.

One third of Al-Beeruny's medical students are women, a fact which Taylor "found impressive considering the added challenges women face in order to acquire an education in Afghanistan." Taylor also described the crisis in health in rural Afghanistan and how women in particular do not have access to adequate obstetric/gynecological care because of a lack of female physicians. Because this school is educating a rural-based physician population, it will be well-matched to serve the needs of this predominantly rural country and it certainly warrants assistance. Taylor noted that, "although Al-Beeruny has no material resources, its student body is incredibly motivated and desperately wants to learn."

Efforts to expand the shipment to include other learning aids like models, skeletons and lab equipment are currently underway. The "Books with Wings Project" is a testament to how a bunch of Canadian medical students can have a constructive impact on an international scale. If you want to get involved with the "Books with Wings Project", please e-mail bookswithwings@yahoo.ca.