

Program Script for Dr. Ayhan Tokgoz (Aired on 20 December 2009)

Category: Health

Location: Gebze

When headed from Istanbul to Izmit, you come across a large district called Gebze.

Gebze is not part of Istanbul, nor of Izmit; it has the atmosphere of a small city in the middle of two large cities.

It has absorbed a great number of migrants for many years, most of whom work in the factory for minimum wage and take the suburban train to go back and forth to Istanbul. In that sense, Gebze is truly a ‘waiting room’.

Gebze is also home to hardworking people who strive for a better life and who dream big but have very small in their hands. It is a small representation of Turkey with its population trapped between Istanbul and Anatolia, and between poverty and middle class.

It has the same conditions as all other low income regions in Turkey. The general problem with health services in Turkey is very apparent in Gebze and it deeply affects the lives of its population.

Today, **4 million 50 thousand people live without any type of social security in Turkey.** In order words, **1 out of 5 adults in Turkey try to survive without any type of social security.**

13 out of 100 people in Turkey have to prove their low income in order to benefit from health services.

According to statistics provided by the Republic of Turkey Ministry of Health, there are 1.4 doctors for every 1,000 people in Turkey.

These depressing numbers also reflect very negatively on the faces of Gebze’s population.

Yet despite all these negative factors, Gebze also became home to an inspiring Changemaking story thanks to the efforts of idealist doctors who want to make a difference in other people’s lives.

Ayhan Tokgoz is an internal diseases specialist. The process that led him to realize a truly Changemaking story began in Hakkari (a deprived province in Southeastern Turkey), where he was working at the beginning of his career.

Having completed his mission in Hakkari, he was appointed to Gebze, where he realized that he has to do more than work at the hospital to make a difference in people’s lives.

Thus, he transformed one of the shacks in the slums to a polyclinic with the help of 3 other friends: Irfan Gokcay, Gulbin Gokcay, Aydin Arici.

What made this place special was the fact that patients who could not afford health services were treated for free. During their spare time from the public hospital, Ayhan Tokgoz and his friends spent their time treating patients at this polyclinic.

Interview with Dr. Ayhan Tokgoz:

Dr. Ayhan Tokgoz: “When I first came here, this area of Gebze was home to 15,000 people, but it did not have any roads, sewage system, nor any doctors. It was a slum with 15,000 inhabitants. This was a remote area that was not connected to central Gebze at the time. We started to offer health services here. We rented a shack in the slums. It was 90 square metres and its ceiling was leaking. It had a flat roof made out of concrete.

We started working there on July 7th of 1987, charging the patients a symbolic fee. Let’s say, if a pack of cigarettes cost 1 USD back in the day, we were charging our patients 80 cents. We even made it free of charge for a while, but some people tried taking advantage of it. Even the grocer, who could clearly afford the fee, was telling us he didn’t have money to pay for it. And on the other hand, an unemployed, poor person would tell us that he could afford it. We experienced such tragic, tragicomical events.

2-3 patients came on the first day, and 7 on the second day. Then all of a sudden, number of patients started to increase drastically. This experience showed us that there is a great demand for health services, that they are satisfied with our work and that they need us in Gebze.”

In 1989, they took even a bigger step and founded the Lokman Hekim Health Foundation. Subsequently, they established the 5-story Lokman Hekim Foundation Hospital in Gebze, thanks to the donations of over 10 thousand people.

Today, the hospital offers services in numerous areas such as optometry, orthopedy, oncology and gynaecology either for a symbolic fee or without any charge.

Here, patients who do not have any type of social security do not have to worry about the fees while receiving treatment.

Interview with a patient:

Woman: “My younger sister has lung cancer. She fainted after taking some medication. We brought her here, they gave her serum. She does not have anyone to take care of her, her husband left her also. So we bring her here, and they take care of her. They provided us with moral and financial support. They even take care of our transportation. They helped us with the operation. May God bless them”

Interview with Dr. Ayhan Tokgoz:

Dr. Ayhan Tokgoz: “We are very well equipped here. We are able to do ultrasound imaging, radiograophy, medical analysis and more. The hardest part for the patients is not the consultation fee. It is the cost of medical analysis, radiography and ultrasound films that worry our patients the most. Therefore, we try to offer those services for an incredibly low fee. We provided numerous health services without any charge or for a very low fee to over 170 thousand patients. And we still do.

We wait for patients in need to get in contact with us. But sometimes, some patients refer some people to us. Some patients tell us that they know of someone who hesitates to come to our hospital and who needs to be treated immediately. Our Foundation has a social committee that visits each and every family in order to identify how crowded the family is and to assess their education and income levels. They go through a serious investigation process; we check their water and electricity bills and look if they have a television and oven at home. We talk to the local administrator, their neighbors and the grocer in order to make sure of their financial status.

Our basic criteria are: The family has to receive minimum wage at most and has to live in a rented house. We have over 600 registered families meeting this criteria that we are regularly in contact with.

Interview with another patient:

Young man: “I used to have a terrible headache and my kidneys were aching also. Once I came here, doctors immediately took care of my problems. Even when I do not have any money, instead of taking public transportation, I walk here so that I can pay my fee.”

All expenses at this hospital are covered by donations made to the Lokman Hekim Health Foundation. Dr. Ayhan Tokgoz’s hardwork to raise funds plays an important role in this.

Besides fundraising, Dr. Tokgoz also transfers most of the income he earns at his private clinic (located in one of the richest neighborhoods of Istanbul) to the hospital in Gebze.

Interview with Dr. Ayhan Tokgoz:

Dr. Ayhan Tokgoz: “Some of our friends donate 80 USD, some 40 USD...but all our friends donate a certain amount on a monthly basis. That’s a very important source of income for us. And most importantly, I used to work full-time in Istanbul and part-time in Gebze. We used to charge our patients in Istanbul a high fee and transfer half of the funds to the hospital in Gebze. We would also ask some of our patients to donate money on top of their consultation fees. Some would donate 150, 250, even 450 USD at each visit.

We channeled those funds to Gebze. Today, our hospital in Gebze is worth 2-2.5 million USD. This was made possible thanks to generous donations.”

Interview with another patient:

Woman: “I knew about this place for over 20 years. I broke my foot as I fell from a balcony long time ago. I had nowhere to go to get treated. This hospital was newly established at the time. They encased my leg in plaster, took x-ray films and I did not have to pay a penny for it.

My grandchild lives with me. She got sick at around 05.00-05.30 A.M. brought her here and they took care of her immediately. They made blood and urine tests, let her stay in the hospital and gave her medication and serum. I did not pay a penny for all that. Well, I have no financial means anyway and my entire neighbourhood and local authorities know that. But when I come to the Lokman Hekim Foundation Hospital, I get treated very nicely.”

Another important and innovative source of income for the hospital is a waste recycling center where all employees consist of volunteers. As a student in the United States, Dr. Tokgoz witnessed a waste decomposing project and wanted to implement it in Turkey also. And although its implementation in Turkey proved to be very troublesome, this project is now one of Lokman Hekim Foundation’s most important sources of income.

When Dr. Tokgoz first decided to collect solid waste, he had to go from door to door for several months. After having collected enough, he was finally able to establish a waste decomposing center.

Interview with Dr. Ayhan Tokgoz:

Dr. Ayhan Tokgoz: “Having established our Foundation in 1986, we then decided to set up a waste recycling center in 1989 and allocate its entire income to our hospital in Gebze. Our first month collecting waste was October 1989, exactly 20 years ago from today. I would call my friends in advance and ask them not to throw away their solid waste such as paper, magazines and flyers, and then go door from door with my own means to collect them.

Having called many friends, patients, socially responsible people who are sensitive about the environment, we visited 5 homes the first week, 10 the next and 20 the week after. I would personally collect the waste and carry it on my back. We collected 230 kilograms of waste in October 1989, 600 kilograms in November and 1 ton of eligible solid waste in December.

Subsequently, the Foundation took on a serious project of waste recycling.”

These women living in Gebze work voluntarily one day a week for the Lokman Hekim Health Foundation throughout the year.

That’s how they get to contribute to the hospital where they receive complimentary treatment. And they do this in a country where the concept of volunteership is not very evolved.

The solid waste collected from various places gets transported to a waste recycling center after being decomposed. Around 1 ton of waste gets decomposed in a year and the generated revenue is allocated to hospital expenses.

Interview with a volunteering woman:

Woman: “I heard about this place and that we have to work for one day a week. So I started working here.”

Interview with another volunteering woman:

Woman: “We heard about this place at the hospital. We have been working here for two and a half years now. We come here with our own will, nobody is forcing us. We contribute to the medical condition of other people while protecting the environment...it’s a very good project!”

Interview with Dr. Ayhan Tokgoz:

Dr. Ayhan Tokgoz: “Our volunteers are people who live here, in the surroundings of the hospital. They asked us: “You have done so much for us, tell us what we can do for you?”. So we asked them to help us out in this project. There are 8-10 women coming here voluntarily every day to separate paper, nylon, plastic and cardboard. We generated approximately 100,000 USD for our hospital until today from this project.”

Lokman Hekim Health Foundation’s changemaking work is not limited to this. Dr. Tokgoz organizes various activities to strengthen the community, as he is aware of the fact that it is not enough to help people out only when they are ill. The foundation offers educational programs to women and provides 280 families in need with food and clothing assistance on a monthly basis. They also offer scholarships to 250 young students. Thereby, they try to address not only the diseases, but also the conditions that cause them.

Interview with a scholarship recipient:

Young girl: “I knew about this foundation as they were located in our neighbourhood. But my first personal contact with them was through my father, during the year I got admitted to university. My father contacted the Foundation informing them that his daughter was admitted to a university but he was unable to pay the tuition fee.

I received moral and financial support from the Foundation. The scholarship I received was very important for me, but they also organize social activities and awareness-raising projects, which are very important for the general public.”

Interview with a patient:

Woman: “They gave us food assistance during the month of Ramadan. Whenever we need something, they are there for us. They gave pencils, notebooks and shoes to my grandchild. They help us a lot.”

Interview with Dr. Ayhan Tokgoz:

Dr. Ayhan Tokgoz: “It makes a great difference to hear the words “may God bless you” from your patients. Or even if they don’t say it, it’s enough to see the difference in the way they perceive life, medicines, doctors and health institutions.

We can all do something by our own means. If you say that you want to work very hard and contribute to the society, it is unacceptable that you use the word “but”.

Dr. Ayhan Tokgoz took on a journey many years ago with 3 friends of his. As time passed, he became the only one working on this project. He became the hero of a changemaking story that was once considered impossible to realize.

He cured thousands of people and tried to help them in every aspect of life. He did not give up when faced with difficulties; he took on the challenge.

He became a ray of hope in the deprived district of Gebze and made a huge difference in the lives of thousands of people.