

This is the unedited version of a profile which appeared in *Australian Doctor* in 2001. The published version may have had minor changes.

The Profile: Hadi Nojournian

CV in Brief

Present: Tutor in anatomy, University of Sydney; rehabilitation manager, Lillian Wells Nursing Home, Parramatta

1997-2000: MSF doctor working with Afghan refugees in Iran

1995: Graduated in medicine, Iran

The Fish Thrower

Thousands upon thousands of little fish had been washed ashore, and lay gasping for breath. A young boy slowly making his way along the beach, throwing them back into the water, was approached by an old man.

“Why do you bother?” asked the man. “You cannot possibly save them all.”

The boy replied as he returned another fish to safety: “Maybe not, but for this fish I have made a difference.”

It's a simple homily, but it had a great impact on those listening to a young Iranian doctor at a recent University of Sydney seminar on refugee health. Partly because of the passion and sincerity with which he spoke - “I bet every woman in the room has fallen in love with him,” a prominent author commented later - and partly because he was so clearly speaking from his own experience as a fish-thrower.

Hadi Nojournian, who now lives and works in Sydney, has a better understanding than most of the plight of the millions who have fled Afghanistan's repressive regime and ended up in refugee camps around the world. Working for Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) with refugees in his home city of Mashad, in Iran's north-east, Nojournian witnessed the physical and emotional trauma of some of the world's poorest and most devastated peoples.

Less than 24 hours after a terrorist attack on the United States had plunged the world into turmoil, Nojournian was able to turn his

audience's attention towards the plight of the poor in Afghanistan, where average life expectancy is only 43.

When asked if he had found the work with Afghan refugees depressing, he replied that every day spent with them was a joy and privilege because "you feel you are doing something useful". He says: "You find the meaning of life and yourself working with underprivileged people".

But when we meet for dinner the next night, a more subdued Nojournian emerges. He had not wanted to sound pessimistic when talking to the medical students, he explains, because he wanted to inspire them to think of others and to effect change. "If all of us think about ourselves, who is going to do it?" he asks.

Nojournian, 33, has brought two treasured photo albums to the restaurant. They have been his close companions since he moved to Sydney just over a year ago, and he has often turned to them for comfort when he is homesick, missing friends and family.

Every page has a story; of children mutilated by the mines which litter Afghanistan, of others whose health was ruined when they were forced into hard labour at the age they should have been starting school, and of people so emotionally devastated that they wish their country would be bombed so they could be freed from suffering. "I heard this not once, but a thousand times," says Nojournian.

One particularly distressing photo is of a nine-year-old with terrible facial burns from a bomb blast. She is so disfigured that she looks like an old woman. It is even more upsetting when Nojournian explains that the photo was taken after plastic surgery. When they first met, she was completely withdrawn but Nojournian was able to gradually coax her back into the world.

"She is one of the people that I miss lots," he says. He cheers up pointing to another page, of photos of him surrounded by patients. "When I am very sad I watch these four pictures," he says. "This gives me power. I love these photos."

During three years with MSF, Nojournian worked long hours, six days a week, seeing up to 120 patients a day. With a limited budget, he had to make tough decisions about who could be admitted to hospital or given

life-saving treatment. Funds were reserved for treatable, life-threatening disorders and not spent on congenital disorders, cancers and other problems where prognosis was so poor “that spending money on them was a waste”.

“I had to choose who is going to die,” he says.

The work was complicated by not knowing patients’ histories - many of whom were so traumatised they couldn’t remember what had happened to them - or being able to do proper follow up.

Nojournian still thinks of all those he was unable to help. “You always think, if I was able to do more...if I was stronger I might have been able to work 15 hours a day, I could have saved one person more,” he says.

Knowing the effect of war on the poor, he fears the repercussions of the attack on the US. “It’s terrible that people have to pay the price of politicians’ mistakes and it is the way all over the world. There have been so many coups and injustices and the gap between the poor and rich is increasing. These sorts of reactions (in the US) are sad but expectable (sic) and we should expect more of these things in the future.”

In Iran, he worked closely with another MSF doctor, Sydney GP and former NSW independent MP, Peter McDonald. Now Nojournian often sits in on McDonald’s consultations at Manly, helping prepare for the Australian Medical Council exams he will sit in October.

McDonald says Nojournian was known in Iran for his extraordinary generosity, giving away whatever money he had to refugees. “He’s one of those rare human beings that is not interested in personal wealth or personal promotion,” McDonald says. “He’s got a very academic leaning and cares deeply about our institutions and about justice; that’s what makes him such an attractive person.”

An old man is in the street, searching for a lost needle. A passerby asks, where did you lose it? In the house, comes the reply.

Then why do you look here? The old man answers: because it is too dark in the house.

“In Iranian culture, this is the meaning of life,” says Nojournian. “All human beings have lost something but are trying to find it in the wrong place; we have lost happiness but we are trying to find it in comfort; but comfort and happiness are two different things.

“Happiness is a very close relationship with the concept of others. Comfort is all about the self. So I chose others, not self.”

Ask Nojournian a question, and the odds are that he will use some such story to illustrate his point. He is a Muslim and believes in Islam, but is influenced more by philosophy than religion. “I am not a very religious person,” he says, “but I do think there will be a justice one day and we will be judged one day by what we did with this life.”

Nojournian grew up in a middle class household - his father was a judge and his mother a primary school teacher - where the emphasis was on learning and humanitarian rather than materialistic values.

“My father used to tell me that the quality of money is more important than the quantity of money,” he says. “One hundred dollars is not equal to one hundred dollars - it depends on how you earned it. If you have found it with hard work and morality then it will bring you happiness but, if not, then it won't bring you happiness.”

When Nojournian was studying for the entrance exam to study medicine, he made a pact with himself; that if accepted into the course, he would work one day a week for the rest of his life for the poor and disadvantaged.

Since moving to Australia, there has been little time to fulfill that contract. For the past six months, he has worked seven days a week - five at a nursing home and two as an anatomy tutor at the University of Sydney - just to get by while he tries to gain registration to practise in Australia. He eventually hopes to become a specialist and work again for MSF.

Jan Armstrong, director of nursing at the Lilian Wells nursing home at Parramatta, which has about 71 residents with dementia, clearly

remembers the day that Nojournian came knocking on her door, looking for work.

She only had to speak with him briefly to realise that he was not a typical nurses aide. But that's how he began there - showering and dressing residents - before being promoted to run its rehabilitation services.

"He's just been an amazing asset," says Armstrong. "People who haven't walked for years are now walking. Everyone just adores him. He genuinely cares for people - I couldn't speak more highly of him." She laughs, "I don't want to sound too soppy but he's faultless. He will be a tremendous asset to the community."

Nojournian has shaved off his beard since arriving in Australia, conscious of discrimination against Muslims and not wanting to be conspicuous.

But he speaks warmly - mostly - of Australia. "Australian people are very good people. They are very kind people, very compassionate, very understanding. I love them but there is just one point that I always think - they are a little bit isolated from the rest of the world."

Nojournian is disappointed with the depth of media and public debate about international issues, which he blames partly on the "geopolitics". "Iran is in the centre of everything, so you have to know the politics," he says. "Iran is a very dynamic society with a lot of intellectuals thinking about what is happening in other parts of the world."

"Australia is a great nation, they could have a more profound effect internationally."

"When I heard about the Tampa crisis, I really felt sorry because such a good nation with so many good people, they don't deserve to be recognised internationally as selfish, racist people."

From all reports, Nojournian is a popular tutor at the University of Sydney. But he has been disappointed that many students are interested more in their personal lives and having fun, rather than social change and international affairs. It is a far cry from his own time at university, as both a student and professor.

But he is not one to dwell on the negative. And, of course, he has another story. About a teacher who made a black mark in the middle of a big white board. When he asked the students what they saw, they said a black mark.

He responded: don't you see this big white board?

"You have to see all of it," says Nojournian. "There is a lot of beauty in life."