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THE SUNDAY TIMES

# 'Blind angel' has 80 bits of shrapnel inside her

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THE little girl known as the "blind angel" of Iraq and brought to Britain for medical treatment funded by Sunday Times readers has up to 80 pieces of shrapnel in her face and head, doctors discovered last week.

One said he was astonished three-year-old Shams Kareem was alive, given the injuries she suffered in a bomb attack in Baghdad in 2006. Her father Hisham found her lying face down on burning asphalt, blinded, disfigured and covered in blood.

Scans and x-rays conducted shortly after her arrival in London revealed the extent of the shrapnel left in her body, including two large fragments behind her right eye. Several others have pierced her eye sockets and penetrated her brain.

Yet Shams - her name means "sun" in Arabic - appears to be a bright girl despite her injuries.

"It is a miracle this child is still alive, given the shrapnel that hit her," said Yassir Abou-Rayyah, a consultant at Great Ormond Street hospital for children last week.

"In the face, from forehead to mouth, 70 to 80 small foreign bodies, small pieces of shrapnel, are scattered. Objects penetrated the bony cavity of the eye and past the eye into the brain.

"But her brain substance is healthy, and she is a very remarkable, intelligent little girl."

Shams's great-aunt Sattootta Hussein, 66, cried as Abou-Rayyah explained the test results and plans for surgery. The consultant, who is waiving any fee, said tests had found no response in either of Shams's eyes. The left one had been destroyed in the blast, he said. But the right had been fused shut and there was still a slim hope that Shams might still recover some sight.

As Sattootta muttered prayers, Hisham looked at his daughter rocking quietly to some music and said "Amen". At 12.15pm on Thursday Abou-Rayyah began his first surgery on Shams's eyes. In a two-hour operation, he reconstructed her eyelids, using tissue from inside her mouth as lining for the new lids.

On checking the two larger pieces of shrapnel lodged behind Shams's right eye, Abou-Rayyah decided it was too risky to try to remove them. "It was best to leave them as the risk of causing damage to the remaining eye was high," he said. He declared himself "very pleased with the result of this first stage". Tests will be carried out this week to see whether Shams can recover any sight in her right eye.

Jonathan Britto, a consultant plastic and aesthetic surgeon at Great Ormond Street, who has also agreed to waive any fees, attended the operation on Thursday to assess Shams's other facial injuries.

Britto was optimistic about surgery to repair her disfigurement, though he warned it will take time. Given Shams's age and growth, certain treatments will need to be delayed until she is a little older. "Work around her mouth and her eyes during this first phase of treatment will bring huge differences to her looks once it is all done," he said.

The treatment has been made possible by readers who donated more than £127,000 after learning of Shams's story in this newspaper eight weeks ago.

While the surgeons will receive no payment, other care costs are likely to be substantial. However, Sherwan Dizayee, the Iraqi foreign minister's adviser, who was touched by Shams's story, has offered his flat in London free of charge for the family to stay in while they are in London.

Letters continue to pour in for Shams. One last week was from a little boy who wrote: "Dear Shams, I am sorry to hear that you are not well. The bomb was really terrible. Those people who dropped the bomb were really horrible! My mummy has sent £30 and I have sent £5.

"This is a picture of the trees so you can see it when you're not blind. Love Sam. Age 7. Swardlow primary school."

After surgery on Thursday, Shams, whose mother died in the attack, called out for her great-aunt, who soothed her by rocking her back and forth. Sattoota said tearfully: "If it was possible, I would not hesitate to give you my eyes and the gift of sight."

Yesterday Shams visited Battersea Park Children's zoo, where she met and stroked Wilbur the rabbit. He was the first animal she had ever touched.

0 comments

 James Smith

1 person listening