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**THE SUNDAY TIMES**

# Doctors give blind Iraqi girl new eyes

Shams Kareem, disfigured by a bomb that killed her mother in November, helped after appeal funded by Sunday Times readers

*Hala Jaber*

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After flying 2,500 miles from Baghdad and pacing hospitals in London while his daughter underwent four operations in seven weeks, Hisham Kareem knew the moment he had been waiting for had finally arrived.

Kareem, 32, bent over three-year-old Shams in Moorfields eye hospital last Wednesday and gazed at her intently. Then he smiled proudly like a father seeing his newborn child for the first time.

"Oh God, oh God, my blind angel has eyes now," he said.

Shams Kareem, who was blinded and disfigured by a bomb that killed her mother in November 2006, had just been fitted with prosthetic eyes in the culmination of a first round of treatment funded by Sunday Times readers who donated £128,000 to give her a new chance in life.

Mangled flesh had been replaced by big brown eyes that restored some of the beauty shattered by the bomb. It was a big step towards making her look more like other children.

The change in her appearance will transform her prospects in Iraq, where, in common with many states in the Arab world, disability remains stigmatised and can mean no education, career or marriage.

Yassir Abou-Rayyah, a consultant at Moorfields and Great Ormond Street hospital who waived his fees and rallied a team of specialists to treat Shams, said he was pleased with her progress.

"There is already a huge difference," he said. "She will need more reconstruction to the eyelids, mainly in the left eye, which was massively damaged, but for this trip she had had enough.

"Shams should return for her second leg of treatment in six months to a year, during which her scars will have matured. She also needs further reconstruction around the mouth and forehead."

Abou-Rayyah's satisfaction could not compare to the joy of Shams's father, who said he would always be indebted to the "good doctor, The Sunday Times and the British public".

"I had my blind angel and Allah sent me more angels," he said. "Shams survived the attack but her injuries were like a death sentence for her. Without your help, she would have remained hidden and shunned by society.

"Thanks to your efforts, my little girl can face the world."

Shams - her name means "sun" in Arabic - and her family were returning in their car from a visit to relations when they were caught up in a multiple bombing by Al-Qaeda in Iraq. More than 200 people were killed as the blasts ripped through Baghdad streets crowded with shoppers.

Shams's mother Wafa, who was cradling her in the back of the car, was engulfed in flames and died at the scene. Her father found the child lying face down on burning asphalt, her head covered in blood.

After three months in hospital, Shams returned home and Kareem prayed that she would one day be treated in Europe.

Then an article in this newspaper touched the hearts of readers. Donations to the Shams Fund poured in, ranging from a cheque for £50,000 from an anonymous donor to a child's £5 pocket money.

Doctors volunteered their services, diplomats speeded visa applications, airlines provided free flights and the family's prayers for western medical expertise were answered.

Abou-Rayyah soon confirmed that not only had Shams's sight been destroyed by shrapnel, but there were 80 pieces of metal still in her face and head.

Undeterred, he and Jonathan Britto, a consultant plastic surgeon at Great Ormond Street who also waived his fees, set to work on repairing her face, a job that is expected to last for several years.

Shams's prosthetic eyes were fitted by Peter Cogin, a senior specialist at Moorfields, after her father had chosen the shades of the whites, pupils and irises.

Between operations, the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) and the Royal London Society for the Blind (RLSB) stepped in with support for Shams's family and advice on how to prepare her for life without sight.

During a visit to the RLSB's Dorton House Nursery for visually impaired children near Sevenoaks, Kent, Shams impressed staff with her ability to find her way around a room quickly and her confidence to walk unaided. Maggie Bindon, the nursery manager, encouraged her to sing.

The RNIB sent a private teacher, Ros Davies, to visit the family at home. Davies introduced games to Shams and explained to her father and great-aunt Sattoota Hussein, 66, how they could train her to cope with most of her day-to-day needs independently.

She also told them of the achievements of many blind children she had taught over the years.

Buoyed by the experts' appraisals of Shams, her father, an unemployed driver, has resolved to ensure that she receives an education.

"This trip has encouraged me to see beyond her blindness," he said, laughing as his daughter suddenly repeated her newly acquired English words, "Good, okay."

As he prepared to return home this week and reunite Shams with her brothers Ghaith, 8, and Taif, 6, he concluded: "Even if she has no sight I am determined for her to be improved so that she can have a better quality of life. I know the storm will clear eventually, with Allah's will."

## 0 comments

 **James Smith**

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