

After fleeing Saddam Hussein's Iraq, **Dlawaer Ala'Aldeen**, has used his position as a doctor to help other Kurdish people.

Rusheng Chew speaks to him about his commitment to human rights

To all extents, Dlawaer (Del) Ala'Aldeen seems like your stereotypical academic—unassuming, keen on his research, and a string of letters after his name. But there is more than meets the eye to this 42 year old professor of clinical microbiology at Nottingham University.

Del is an Iraqi Kurd, which is the reason for many of the major choices he has had to make. Until not so long ago, the now deposed president of Iraq, Saddam Hussein, was engaged in “systematic genocide of the Kurdish people, as well as wanton denials of human rights in Iraq,” as Del puts it.

Military service was compulsory for Iraqi youth. Back in 1984 this meant only two choices for the newly graduated pro-human rights doctor from the University of Al-Mustansiriya: “Either I joined the army, in which case I would have had to fight against my own people, or I left.” Del chose the latter—but it was not all that easy to leave. He

that aims to “enhance medical and scientific cooperation between Kurdistan and the UK.” The association organises seminars and lectures, and is instrumental in getting UK academics to act as external examiners for the three medical schools in Iraqi Kurdistan. It also collects donations of books and equipment. “The Kurds always had the potential; it was just not developed under Saddam,” he says. Fighting for the Kurds was dangerous because it meant going against Saddam Hussein's regime. “I have no regret fighting Saddam or tyrants like him,” he says.

The Kurdish Scientific and Medical Association has also enabled Del to promote the Kurdish plight. In 1991, during the Gulf war, Del met the former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher to obtain her help in pushing for British support for the Kurds. This resulted in £20m (\$33m; €28m) of aid for them, and the creation of a safe haven, which lasted until the 2003 war.

Surviving Saddam

had to leave Iraq without his family through the mountains on the Kurdish-Iranian border using smugglers' routes. Once out of Iraq, he made his way to the United Kingdom, where the remainder of his family gradually joined him.

I asked Del why he chose medicine. “Medicine? It was something that I always knew I wanted to do—it is top of the professions as far as humanitarian reasons are concerned.” And why did he choose microbiology? “I wanted to go back to Iraq, especially Kurdistan, and help rebuild it once Saddam was overthrown—who would have known he would be in power for so long? So initially I wanted to specialise in infectious diseases, as over 70% of patients in Iraq suffer from some form of infection. But the academic side of things was being grossly neglected, and I figured that there was a greater impact to be made if I did academic clinical microbiology instead,” he says.

But as committed as Del is to microbiology, in which he trained in the United Kingdom, he is even more passionate about his work for the Kurdish cause, especially where human rights and chemical and biological weapons are concerned. This is hardly surprising, given that Del has had experience of discrimination against Kurds in Iraq, and that his parents and siblings were survivors of attacks with mustard gas and other chemical agents. To this end he founded the British based Kurdish Scientific and Medical Association in 1988—one of the organisations

Del is also involved in work outside the association. He was appointed to the British working party on chemical and biological weapons, which works towards disarmament. In June this year, two weeks after the toppling of Saddam's statue, he went back to Baghdad to work with the charity Save the Children, helping the understaffed paediatric hospital. Iraq was short of drugs and supplies and so instead of being directly involved in patient care, Del took on a coordinating role, concentrating on “enhancing the capability [of the health services], and suggesting projects to help in its reconstruction and modernisation.”

How did he feel, going to a place that was literally a war zone? “I was prepared for the risks,” he says, adding, “What brought me back was greater than what could have kept me out again.” He told me in no uncertain terms how liberating it felt to be back in the city of his youth, “now that the atmosphere of fear and terror is gone.”

Ever the activist, Del has these words of advice for medics: “Stand up to human rights abuses anywhere in the world; as medics we can do more than politicians to make the world a better place. As doctors, we have the right to push politicians for improved health services for people in other countries, and this gives us the best angle, and moral high ground, for lobbying.”

Rusheng Chew *third year medical student,*
University of Nottingham
Rusheng@hotmail.com



Dlawaer Ala'Aldeen