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Israeli medical pioneer wins Bronfman Prize

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Staff Reporter

Dr. Amitai Ziv is literally creating a virtual revolution in the world's medical communities, and he just got a whole lot of recognition for his efforts.

The pediatrician and former Israel Defence Forces fighter pilot will receive the 2007 Charles Bronfman Prize for his considerable contributions to the burgeoning field of simulation-based medical education.

According to the Bronfman Prize website, the \$100,000 award is given annually to one outstanding individual, under 50, whose "Jewish values infuse their humanitarian



Dr. Amitai Ziv in MSR's simulation centre [Eyal Gross photo] accomplishments and provide inspiration to the next generations."

Ziv, 48, certainly qualifies.

In 2001, his passionate drive to change the longstanding paradigm of cognitively focused medical education and assessment led him to found the Israel Center for Medical Simulation (MSR) at the Sheba Medical Center in Tel Hashomer.

Designed as a “virtual hospital,” MSR was one of the first specialized training facilities of its kind in the world, and the Israeli government has made many of its courses mandatory for licensing in various health professions.

The centre allows medical professionals in various disciplines to enhance their hands-on skills in a variety of scenarios within a safe, controlled environment.

The equipment used ranges from low-tech actors and mannequins to high-tech virtual reality computers and imaging systems.

Need training in how to treat victims of chemical warfare? MSR can set it up. Want to test the mettle of military doctors with a full-blown, terrorist bombing re-enactment? That can be arranged.

It was Ziv’s own simulation training as a pilot that inspired him to embark on his quest to change the medical education system.

While doing his residency after his army service, Ziv experienced a culture shock.

“The aviation field was based on a safety culture of training. [Pilots used] simulators long before they were put on an aircraft,” he told The CJN in a phone interview from Israel last week.

“But when you enter medicine, you realize the profession has been skewed for... generations to deal mostly with the cognitive aspect [of training]. We admit candidates on the [basis of medical theory], without putting enough emphasis on cultural skills, manual skills and coping under pressure.”

Ziv believes that medical students, paramedics, anesthesiologists and other health professionals can only benefit from confronting the “nightmare scenarios” that occur in emergency rooms, in the field or almost anywhere else.

“Simulation education has the advantage of not coming [at] the expense of the patient’s safety,” Ziv said.

“In aviation, [one] assumes that the pilot has been well-prepared and is ready to take off with passengers in the back seat,” he added. “Whereas in medicine, the mere fact that you’ve been in the school system for years... does it mean that you’ve been checked for readiness and you can actually deal with that heart attack, alone, in a clinic somewhere in Toronto? This is far from being true.”

Ziv knows the medical establishment is reluctant to integrate his methods into training and certification practices.

“One would expect people to adopt and embrace [medical simulation] in an intuitive manner... Why not train ourselves in a safe environment?” he asked rhetorically. “But it’s not that simple. [Doctors] come from a very conservative field. For too many years, medicine has not been open enough to the transparent debriefing that takes place in simulation [training].”

Still, Ziv continues to push for a cultural change, and his vision is slowly being adopted by institutions around the world.

In Canada, he is a prized consultant to universities and medical organizations, including the Michener Institute for Applied Health Sciences in Toronto and Montreal tech giant Canadian Aerospace Electronics.

Last year, McGill University opened its own medical simulation centre after consultations with Ziv.

And after recent talks with contacts in Edmonton, Ziv expects to see a centre there sometime soon as well.

In fact, Ziv is particularly fond of this country. His parents emigrated from Montreal to Israel in 1949, and although he was born in the Holy Land, he has dual citizenship and retains friends and family across Canada.

Ziv will receive the Charles Bronfman Prize on May 1 at a ceremony in New York.

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