

Making use of unused medication

Friends for Health collects and distributes to the needy in a careful, supervised way

• By JUDY SIEGEL-ITZKOVICH

In these times, when value-added tax, water, gas, electricity, property tax, and everything in the supermarket is becoming more expensive, it's easier to list those few things whose prices are staying the same.

Even now, there are sick people, including many elderly, who have stopped taking vital medications so they can buy basic food instead. How will they cover copayments for medications in the basket of health services, not to mention those not included in the basket?

The additions to the 2025 basket of health services are due to be decided any day now by the public volunteer committee chaired by hematology Prof. Dina Ben-Yehuda, but even though it has hundreds of thousands of shekels and could choose to include drugs and medical technologies, these funds are far from covering them all.

Fortunately, there is an organization out there that is easing the medication burden – Haverim L'Refuah (Friends for Health). Established back in 2003 in Bnei Brak, the need for it is greater than ever. Baruch Lieberman was told by a friend, Yechiel Landman (who has since passed away), that a man whose wife had recently died, was left with stocks of very expensive medication costing NIS 25,000 then – and he didn't know what to do with it.

Putting their heads together, they immediately came up with the idea of establishing a nonprofit organization that would collect medications that patients no longer needed and distribute them among those Israelis who couldn't access or afford them.

Since Lieberman and his organization's 2,400 volunteers, including social workers, physicians, pharmacists, and others, don't have the money to buy drugs for Haverim L'Refuah, collecting unused medications that have not passed their expiry date and are enclosed in closed packages makes supplying them to the needy possible.

Up to NIS 500 million worth of unexpired medicines are destroyed yearly. The value of drugs distributed last year totaled NIS 106,824, 000, while the number of medi-



BARUCH LIEBERMAN, the founder of Haverim L'Refuah (Friends for Health.)
(Haverim L'Refuah)

cations was 53,228,712. Medications can be collected at all Super-Pharms around the country, all Bank Mizrahi branches, various hospitals, and many private homes that can be accessed via the websites – a total of 1,075 collection centers around Israel.

Its English-language website is at eng.haverim.org.il/ and its Hebrew-language website is at haverim.org.il.

Lieberman told *The Jerusalem Post* that he is open to the websites being translated into additional languages, including Russian and Amharic.

The organization also has educational aims: to teach patients and their friends how to establish crowdfunding campaigns in order to raise donations for purchasing drugs for especially costly medications as well as for reserve soldiers. With hundreds of thousands of evacuees forced to leave their homes in the North and South after the Israel-Hamas War broke out, Haverim L'Refuah campaigned for drug donations for them.

The organization is also running a cam-

paign that will be broadcast on commercial TV channels, the Internet, and social media, calling on the public to donate all medications they don't need at one of the association's collection stations.

About a decade ago, when Lieberman came up against a law that made it illegal to collect second-hand medications, he lobbied to have it allowed under supervision and finally succeeded. Today, Haverim L'Refuah works hand-in-hand with the Health Ministry, which appreciates its efforts.

The organization had originally considered collecting unused drugs in the US, but there, most medications are sold in bottles, and once the seal is punctured, they cannot be donated. Fortunately, in Israel, most medications come in blister packs in individual boxes for a month's supply, so whatever is untouched can be donated, Lieberman said.

Thirty volunteer pharmacists and three paid professionals sort an average of 5,000 packets of drugs that have been donated, according to medical indications and expira-



UP TO NIS 500 million worth of unexpired medicines are destroyed yearly.
(Spencer Platt/Getty Images)

tion dates, and then distribute them to those in need – for free. Medications received that are damaged or expired are disposed of in a way that doesn't harm the environment.

Beyond the fact that the unused medicines sitting in your cupboard at home can save the lives of others, many people simply throw them in the trash or down the drain. Medicines that are thrown away pollute the environment and sometimes even seep into the groundwater and thus harm agriculture, animals, and humans.

Studies and laboratory tests have also proven that disposed-of medicines simply return to our bodies as harmful waste. Therefore, the organization sends medications that are not suitable for use for green destruction.

Those who seek medications just have to contact a social worker from their public health fund and get a prescription from their physician. More than 2,000 volunteers deliver the drugs to their homes.

The new campaign was made possible by Haverim L'Refuah winning first place in the Israel Earth Prize competition, initiated by

Toyota Israel and the Union Group.

The organization received a grant of NIS 1 million, surpassing applications of over 100 other associations, initiatives, and organizations. The prize competition was launched in 2022 as part of Toyota's vision to lead a better and greener society in Israel and will last a total of five years.

Merav Schwartz, a vice president for human resources at Toyota Israel and leader of the Israel Environmental Award stated: "The competition for the award was created precisely for companies and organizations like Friends for Health, who have set themselves the goal of improving the environment and society of all of us in Israel for a better future."

"Registration for the 2025 competition recently closed, and in February, for the first time, in parallel with the professional judging process, the general public will also be invited to vote and choose their favorite initiative. Toyota Israel is proud to support organizations and nonprofits like Friends for Health and lead to change and a better world – for all of us."