Taher Shams, Managing Director – Zulekha Healthcare Group



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Taher Shams, Zulekha Healthcare Group's Managing Director, outlines the group's expansion in UAE and India and its participation in the Dubai Health Authority's "Dubai Health Experience" medical tourism portal. In addition, he speaks about fears of market saturation in UAE.

Mr. Shams, you have been part of the Zulekha Hospital group for more than 25 years – can you introduce the group to our readers and outline major milestones?

I began working for Zulekha Hospital in 1995, just three years after the first hospital in Sharjah opened its doors in 1992. We were still a modest hospital with only 30 beds and a few departments back then. We continued to invest and expand as our journey progressed. We began the construction of a hospital in Dubai in 2002 and completed it within two years' time, in 2004.

The expanding firm now includes two hospitals in the UAE (Sharjah and Dubai), as well as two medical centres and a chain of pharmacies. In India the group owns a multispecialty hospital named Alexis. Our workforce in United Arab Emirates (UAE) consists of 1,800 people with another 815 in India.

Zulekha Hospital has received extensive recognition for its commitment to quality care and sustainable business practises – most recently with the Newsweek award. Can you explain what that recognition means to you and the importance of quality for the Zulekha group?

We are very focused on quality. The Newsweek award demonstrates our commitment to providing the highest quality healthcare to our patients, but that is just our latest award, highlighting our achievements in this area. We are also the only healthcare provider awarded the Dubai Quality Gold Award for Business Excellence in Healthcare Sector in UAE for 2022. Prior to that, we achieved several others worth mentioning, such as the Joint Commission International Accreditation certificate, and College of American Pathologists Accreditation for pathology and laboratory medicine standards, others such as LEED for the group, WELL certifications, and Advanced CSR Label Award for our corporate social responsibility and sustainability initiatives. . Zulekha Hospital has also been named recently a winner of the 11th Cycle of the Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum Business Award, an award that recognises top performance in business, innovation and customer excellence.

Providing world-class healthcare is one of the six pillars of the National Agenda, not only for local patients but also for regional and international ones. How do you see the UAE competing on the medical tourism sphere with neighbouring countries and what role can Zulekha Hospital play in bringing international patients to the UAE?

The government is making a lot of effort and launching a lot of measures to attract medical tourists. Zulekha Hospital is happy to be a part of the Dubai Health Authority's "Dubai Health Experience" a one-of-a-kind medical tourism portal that allows visitors to acquire all the information they need at the touch of a button. Now of course due to the pandemic this has decreased, however a lot of areas have boomed – such as plastic surgery and dialysis. We gather the data for our patients, such as visa status – if they are on a valid visitors' visas, we consider them as medical tourists. I believe the UAE is well-positioned to compete with countries like Turkey, which is highly competitive in procedures such as hair transplants, cosmetics and plastic surgery. We are seeing an increasing number of patients travel to the UAE for these procedures. Lebanon was also a strong competitor – but a lot of doctors realized the UAE's potential and its state-of-the-art infrastructure and decided to move here.

A very important aspect to mention is the UAE's connectivity. We have four national airlines that fly all over the world. We are the shining star in the Middle East, with a strategic location, fantastic connectivity, effective governance and regulations – we expect these qualities to attract more and more patients over time – because all of the ingredients are in place, we just need one final push, which is already happening from the government, and nothing will stop us from fulfilling this mission.

Several global rankings show and highlight the response of the UAE to COVID as one of the best and fastest in the world, in aspects that range from testing to vaccination rates. Can you elaborate on what allowed the UAE to respond in such an efficient manner and point out the industry's efforts?

I have an example of government agility in terms of making quick decisions – we were able to bring back over 95 clinical staff including doctors and nurses from India within 2- or 3-days, and this was only possible because regulators, the civil aviation department, and all relevant stakeholders came together and helped to make it happen within a week.

These are the commitments we had from the government, and they made it much easier for all of us on the ground to understand because their vision and activities were communicated in a clear and timely manner, which helped us a lot here.

As an industry, we have also formed the Dubai Hospitals Business Group, which was useful for regulators as a voice from the private sector. The Dubai Hospitals Business Group is not just a group, we have a license that is registered with the Dubai Economic Department. This was especially significant during COVID, as it allowed us to connect, come together, and discuss the challenges we were all facing collectively and look for potential solutions. An example of that would be informing the government of the number of beds we had available as a group so that they could mobilize the people in those facilities. When it comes to negotiating for subsidies, we could speak up collectively and present our case to the government, and they would listen. Communication became much easier, and more assistance was provided. We have tried to support the government's efforts in every way we can, including providing free treatments to a large number of patients, forming partnerships with different charities, and doing a lot of work during COVID to give back to the communities.

What are some of the challenges the industry is facing now and what are the potential solutions?

I believe that a lot of the healthcare industry relied on PCR testing, and now that we have gone away from that, we are back to basics, to what we are meant for and what we are supposed to do, and everyone is doing some soul searching to figure out what will work and what will not post COVID. We have seen some departments gain or lose patients, such as pulmonology, which used to be busy but is no longer. A lot of patients' priorities have changed, and their awareness has improved – so the dust is just settling and things are becoming clearer. As an industry, we can only forecast the next month or a quarter at the most. We are still in the midst of the pandemic; therefore, we must be prepared for that and other scenarios as well as the future. We are all treading on a tight rope.

Besides building a lot of new hospitals here in the UAE, much of the industry is looking towards regional or fully international expansion. Is it something Zulekha Group is also considering?

We first expanded internationally in 2016, when we opened a branch in Nagpur, Maharashtra, India. It's a 200-bed multi-specialty hospital in Dr. Zulekha's hometown of Nagpur that aspires to serve the entire Central India area by providing the highest quality of medical care across various disciplines, with renowned specialists and top state-of-the-art equipment. We were planning further expansion in the region prior to COVID, however now those plans have been put on hold and we need to re-evaluate and see what will be at par to what we planned prior to COVID.

Do you fear there will be market saturation in the UAE with all the new hospitals being built, and what is your take on the needs of the UAE hospital sector now?

I believe there is overcapacity and that building more hospitals is unnecessary. I think the industry requires more centres of excellence, as opposed to the UAE, where we are accustomed to the real estate model of constructing a building, then possibly converting it into a hospital. We are seeing a lot of players from industries other than healthcare join and suffer. Their buildings are ready, but there are things they did not realise they needed. Payers are also refusing to grant them access; costs must be reduced, and pricing must be examined.

What does the future hold for Zulekha Hospital?

We expanded in 2019 and we would like to see the full utilization of the brand-new hospital in the years to come. We are continuously innovating and communicating with our patrons and partners. For example, if they cannot get to us, we want to be able to reach out to our patrons and hence introduced Zulekha Homecare Services in 2021. In continuation we have launched our brand mascot, Dr. Zee who is emphasising the brand’s mission of availability of medical services anytime anywhere and promotes online registrations with a simple QR code. This avoids touch points at receptions, waiting time and makes it convenient for patients to book appointments quickly. We will continue to innovate over time and stay ahead of the curve.

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