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Dr Ali Al Sayed, Director of the Pharmaceutical Services Department at the Dubai Health Authority and Chairman of DUPHAT Conference, speaks about the current endeavor of the Government to make the healthcare system in Dubai more accessible and cost-effective for everyone, how competition is healthy for the industry, and where he sees the healthcare system in five years from now.

What are the main priorities of the Dubai Health Authority in terms of improving access to healthcare and providing a better healthcare system for its people?

Our top priorities today are to improve accessibility to healthcare and that's why in the government, as well as the private sector they are working together in coordination. They are collaborating to have full access, for the patient to be able to choose his or her physician, and to go and take the first opinion, a second opinion, and if they need a third opinion also. So, they are given a choice to select and to go for more and to make sure that the decision or the diagnosis is correct. The second thing we are moving towards is to make this available not only for the Emirati population, but for all the residents of Dubai as well.

So universal healthcare what you are moving towards?

Yes, and accessibility for all. Everyone will have the same access to the physicians and doctors, so that they will be able to select to whom they would go and to whom they will not. The patients will have more power to choose and at the same time, there will be no patient who cannot be treated whether it’s a diagnosis, surgical or medical issue.

Recently, the government moved to control the price of pharmaceutical products and medicines, but what was the need to start regulation of prices? And what is the trend in terms of access to the actual medicines?

The Ministry of Health are the people who are responsible for this because they are looking out for all the countries in the region—and well, that is a good step number one, because you know that we have fluctuation in our currency. At the same time comparing UAE with other neighboring countries and GCC countries, you will find that some of their medicines are higher in price so the Ministry of Health wants to bring it closer to those prices. We understand that there is a difference in lifestyle and expenses, but it doesn’t mean that these differences should make a big difference in the prices.

Investments of pharmaceutical companies in Dubai has been increasing; is it also a priority of the government to attract investors?

Research and trials and so on are one of the top priorities at this moment as the Government are encouraging companies to do more trials and research here. Dubai is becoming a hub for medicine as many companies started producing more and more here and then re-exporting. There are several reasons for a company to do this: softer regulations and easier movement of products make it desirable for a company to shift its head office here**.** Another reason is that the Government here is encouraging innovation. We understand that new treatments, new products are important for the patients and this is why the Government is encouraging more research to be done here in Dubai.

What would you say are the main factors that make Dubai such a success in updating its healthcare system in such a short amount of time?

In the medical field, we have been positive on this and had quite some success. In Dubai, you have many ways of succeeding. Dubai is, first of all, a very safe and secure place. The people are open-minded and the leadership, the Government, is open-minded and eager for improvement as well.

What do you think is left to make Dubai the Burj Khalifa of the pharmaceutical industry?

This is not the end, there is no end for improvement. We always have to try to continue moving forward. So even if we achieve something, we have to keep trying to be better. They say it’s easy to reach to the top, but then you have to maintain that, and this is the difficult part. There’s no end for quality, no end for success. Nowadays people are succeeding in every field, whatever field it may be, here in Dubai. In the medical field, we are also succeeding—it may be slower than in other fields, but we are certainly still succeeding.

One of the challenges frequently mentioned is the introduction of new treatments and products to Dubai and to the UAE. However, one of the bigger challenges seems to be the need for attracting medical professionals as well so that people know how to do the new treatments, use the new products, and how to diagnose patients correctly. How are you attracting medical talent to Dubai?

There are two aspects to this: The first part is monetary; the second part is non-monetary. If you offer a person a salary you give this person an incentive to come. However, there needs to be support for this person. For example, you cannot give someone a good salary but not give them respect or support. You have to give this person responsibility. You have to recognize him or her. You have to understand the problems and provide him or her with a healthy environment. A person will not come to a place where there are no good schools, no good malls, markets, shopping places, restaurants. A person will not come to the hospital if it is not a friendly hospital. Even with a good salary, if there is no healthy or robust environment, the person will not come. People are ready to spend, people are ready to sell, people are ready to stay, people are ready to work with less monetary incentives, but they should be in a place where the environment works for them and their families.

As the chairman, what exactly do you plan to accomplish with these conferences? What is the main purpose?

The reality of DUPHATI is that we want to become the number one conference. Where we were before compared to where we are now—18 or 19 years ago, we were at the bottom of the stack—you see a huge difference. Now, we are the second country in the world. Who is the best? The best is the American Society Health System Pharmacists meetings. They have two meetings, a midyear meeting and an end of the year meeting. They are the best. They are number one and we are number two. This, of course, is only my opinion. Some Americans say that we are coming close to them and that we have some advantages that they don't have. But for me, to tell you frankly, we are still number two. They are professionals and we are professionals. We are competing with them for the sake of the profession, not as an enemy. Are we better than before? We are better than before but there is still room for improvement.

I think this is healthy competition. In the end, we are all colleagues and this competition is for the benefit of the profession. All of us have one goal, all of us have the goal to become the best profession in the world. When we succeed it is a good thing for the whole world. But in order to succeed we have to formulate new things every year and new ideas. We should not say that we have done a great job this year and finish, next year we will copy it. No. We should not copy it. We should never copy. Innovation is a very important aspect. We have to change. We have to do something, add new things, in order to come up with a new face, a new shape.

Is there any intention of moving towards the harmonization of the different regulatory bodies within the region and in the Middle East? Is there any conversation about this harmonization?

Dubai is part of the GCC countries. Now, how they will do it, I don't know but yes, I think it will happen. They are part of the family. Maybe we will be the model and to tell you frankly, not only in healthcare, Dubai is the model for many things.

What are your expectations for the next five years for Dubai?

Booming in everything, even in the healthcare industry. I feel that in two and a half years, Dubai will see a different healthcare system. See, to have a successful healthcare system, you need to have easy accessibility, be cost-effective, and reduction in mortality and morbidity. For example, good accessibility means that the lowest person and the highest person have equal accessibility. Affordability is also part of the accessibility, of course. So, I'm going to say that accessibility means the patient will get his treatment and he can afford it and furthermore, we will see a reduction of

mortality and morbidity. When it is accessible to everyone, then there will be less mortality and morbidity. These things, I think, we will see in the coming years. And if we see this, then we can say, okay now, we can compare the UAE with other countries. I think soon we are going to see a good system in the entire world. We are going to see an evolving system and part of that, that's what I am seeing now here in Dubai.

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