Abdulkareem Sultan Al Olama – CEO, Al Jalila Foundation, UAE

The Al Jalila Foundation focuses on the biggest health challenges in the region: cardiovascular diseases, obesity, diabetes, cancer and mental health problems

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Dr Abdulkareem Sultan Al Olama, CEO of the Al Jalila Foundation, discusses the Foundation's goal to position the UAE at the forefront of medical education and research, the importance of top-level international partnerships, as well as the Foundation's exciting upcoming projects to propel the UAE as a hub for the fourth industrial revolution.

Could you begin by introducing yourself as CEO of the Al Jalila Foundation?

I am a medical graduate of the United Arab Emirates University, where I also worked as a teaching assistant in the department of surgery for a number of years before I joined Dubai Healthcare City (DHCC) to work on key strategies and initiatives to position DHCC as the world's first integrated healthcare free zone. In 2007, I was appointed executive manager of the Dubai Harvard Foundation for Medical Research (DHFMR), responsible for driving the institution's goal of promoting a resurgence in scientific discovery in the Middle East. This was my first step towards a career dedicated to philanthropy. Later, I was appointed executive director of the Center for Healthcare Planning and Quality, the independent regulatory body of the Dubai Healthcare City Authority (DHCA), where I was responsible for setting and upholding healthcare standards within DHCC. In 2012, I was approached to leverage my experience to establish the Al Jalila Foundation.

Can you share with us the journey of the Al Jalila Foundation and its role in positioning the UAE at the forefront of medical innovation?

In the UAE, we are fortunate to have a high quality of life, excellent hospitals and highly experienced doctors. However, if we want to improve the country's healthcare, we need to dedicate time and money to support medical research and education. The Al Jalila Foundation has a strong leadership with His Highness Sheikh Ahmed Bin Saeed Al Maktoum as chairperson of the board of trustees and Dr Raja Easa Saleh Al Gurg as chairperson of the board of directors and member of the board of trustees; she was ranked by Forbes as one of the world's 100 most powerful women in 2019 and recently number one in the Middle East.

In addition, we have a strong governance framework which consists of a scientific advisory committee that shapes and drives our medical research agenda, a fund management committee who oversees our endowments, an internal compliance committee and Deloitte as third party auditor to ensure transparency and that the Foundation is aligned with best business practices.

The UAE is similar to developed countries in terms of health, with the majority of patients suffering from non-communicable diseases. The Al Jalila Foundation focuses on the biggest health challenges in the region: cardiovascular diseases, obesity, diabetes, cancer and mental health problems. Since the Foundation's inception, the need for improved local research has been apparent and this is what drove us to build the UAE's first medical research facility, where we aim to unite local and international scientists to address some of the most pressing healthcare questions.

In line with our overall goal, we provide seed grants to some of the brightest researchers. The scientific advisory committee initially filters all the applications and then, with the help of 82 key opinion leaders worldwide, we select the most qualified scientists and research studies. Al Jalila Foundation seed grants are offered to all nationalities, provided that the research is carried out within the UAE. To date, we have awarded 95 research grants invested AED 25 million (USD 6.8 million). In addition, we have provided eight international research fellowships to train local medical talent at renowned institutions around the world.

What are the biggest challenges you have faced when trying to attract investment?

The UAE has a strong philanthropic spirit with generous donors supporting a number of great causes such as fighting hunger, poverty and diseases. Unfortunately, medical research is not as high of a priority as it is in the UK or USA, two countries that are big supporters of medical

universities and research institutions; they have seen the benefits of quality research over hundreds of years. It is understandable that as a young nation we are still planting the seeds on the importance of medical research to save lives. Until now, donors have been primarily focused on providing access to quality medical care for people in need, and while this is very honourable, it is also very encouraging to see a shift towards funding medical research.

Our research institution is strategically located in the heart of Dubai Healthcare City, next to the Mohammed Bin Rashid University of Medicine and Health Sciences, and within this ecosystem, we have the resources to cultivate world-class medical education and research.

What can be done to improve investment levels?

Al Jalila Foundation has raised significant funds with the generous support of our philanthropic partners and invested AED 200 million to deliver on our promise to establish the first-of-its-kind multidisciplinary biomedical research institute in the UAE.

The establishment of a medical research facility is a good start. Here we offer great research opportunities and hope to see the number of scientists and collaboration with international research institutions increase to support our vision to advance local medical research.

Can you share with us the significance of your international collaborative partnerships with institutions like the Harvard Medical School?

In the past, we have collaborated with Harvard Medical School to nurture top-level UAE medical professionals to pursue postgraduate training at Harvard.

We look forward to expanding our global partnerships with leading medical research institutions to advance the capabilities of local medical talent. With medical innovation being our priority, we are continuously seeking collaborative research opportunities with international research institutions to fulfil our mutual ambitions.

Moreover, the road towards fostering great medical talent in the UAE requires a scholarship program for doctors, nurses and healthcare professionals. Al Jalila Foundation is proud to have awarded 59 scholarships for master’s degrees and PhDs, within the UAE and abroad; with 39 doctors having already graduated from specialized fields.

In addition, it is crucial that doctors in the UAE specialize in subfields. As an example, there is a need for more endocrinologists, cardiologists and nephrologists dedicated to diabetic patients rather than the general patient pool.

What are the objectives of Al Jalila Foundation in the next five years?

In line with revolutionary gene technology, such as CAR-T technology, we want to contribute to finding a cure to diabetes. In the next few years, we also want to establish a Genome Center of Excellence to capture the UAE's unique gene map. In line with Al Jalila Foundation's core value to transforms lives, we remain committed to delivering on our promises to donors, scientists and patients.

What keeps you motivated?

I am grateful to have a wonderful team passionate about philanthropy and giving back to society in the most creative ways. Research is a life-long commitment and a responsibility we take seriously. From the start, my team and I set out to make a dent in the world and every day we are inspired by the people we serve be it a hopeful patient, an aspiring student or a pioneering scientist. I encourage people to do what they love most and, in doing so, leave a mark on the world.

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