Ibtesam Al Bastaki – Director of Healthcare Investment, Dubai Health Authority (DHA)



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Dr Ibtesam Al Bastaki, director of healthcare investment at the Dubai Health Authority (DHA) describes how healthcare investment is flowing into the Emirate via both pure investments and public-private partnerships (PPPs) and the impact of a range of other topics including screening programs, digital health, and healthcare tourism.

Could you introduce yourself and the scope of your role as director of healthcare investment at the Dubai Health Authority?

I graduated as a physician from the Royal College of Surgery in Dublin before pursuing my postgraduate studies in family medicine and obtaining a master’s degree in health management. Overall, I have nearly 23 years of experience, including hands-on experience in patient care with the last 13 years spent in leadership positions. I have held various management roles, such as overseeing and running clinics, engaging in business development, working in the Prime Minister’s Office, and being employed in the private sector. Currently, I am back in the public sector serving as the director of healthcare investment at the DHA.

In my current position, my objective is to continue the government’s mission of improving the healthcare ecosystem in Dubai. This involves creating investment opportunities and strengthening the relationship between the private and public sectors. We have developed a concise strategy that

prioritizes two key areas: pure investments, and public-private partnerships (PPPs).

Firstly, the investment environment in Dubai is reflected extremely well in our investment guide based on the capacity planning which identifies market gaps, opportunities and the supply and demand dynamics of Dubai. It offers insights into how the market operates and provides guidance for investors, such as pharmaceutical and medical device companies, looking to establish a presence in Dubai.

Another crucial aspect of our healthcare investment approach is promotion. We organize various workshops, conferences and exhibitions to introduce investors to key stakeholders already active in the market. These events showcase the tremendous potential Dubai has for foreign direct investment (FDI). Everything we do at the DHA is centred around the patient, and by attracting more money into healthcare, we strengthen the payment and service providers, which in turn gives better care to patients. Attracting investments ensures greater efficiency and quality within the healthcare system, thereby facilitating our ultimate goal of a healthier Dubai.

How important is the relationship between the private and public sectors in Dubai when working in the field of investments?

Crucial. Recognizing the importance of attracting investments, we have acknowledged that this task is too significant for the government alone. Especially in the post-COVID era, we have chosen to work even closer with private industry. We understand that this is key to establishing a sustainable investment market for the future. As mentioned earlier, this approach not only ensures a higher standard of healthcare but also positions Dubai as an appealing destination for health tourism and a healthcare investment hub for areas like manufacturing, digital health, and start-ups.

To make the region more attractive for Foreign Direct Investment FDI and to foster a greater number of start-ups, we have designated free zones in Dubai. These zones aim to create an environment that nurtures start-ups and facilitates their growth into successful commercial entities. This year, our focus has been on the MedTech companies. As the regulator, we are facilitating talks and setting up processes with the private sector, while also collaborating with public and private healthcare providers to integrate these innovations into the clinical setting. This approach grants start-ups accessibility and visibility not only within the UAE and Dubai but also across the MENA and GCC regions. Start-ups will be a big part of Dubai in the future, and we aspire to venture into the pharmaceutical realm in the coming years.

On the other side of the spectrum, we have PPP projects, specifically in terms of infrastructure development. These projects can take the form of a build-operate-transfer (BOT) model, a joint venture, or a partnership between the public and private sectors. For example, two years ago we undertook a joint venture to construct a dialysis and rehabilitation centre and contracted with a private provider to run the operations over a specific period. This approach has yielded numerous benefits from a business point of view, and patients have been extremely satisfied with the high quality and efficient level of care.

In Q3 or Q4 2023, we are also aiming to finalize a 25-year contract with a private provider to establish a world-class, purpose-built cardiovascular centre of excellence. This represents a significant and really exciting milestone for these PPP projects. Furthermore, it is important to note that PPPs are not limited to physical infrastructure, they can also involve enhancing digital platforms for data and information transfer.

All in all, we found by using smaller projects that utilise partnerships, the result is greater accountability and improved service delivery. This gives us confidence that when we do scale up to these large projects such as with the cardiovascular centre, we will only witness a successful outcome.

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Healthcare ecosystems in every country have their own unique challenges. What do you see as the major hurdles to overcome within Dubai healthcare?

The healthcare environment is very complex due to its direct involvement with human beings, and the many underlying issues that must be addressed. Effective management requires careful prioritisation.

Currently, I believe we need to focus more on screening programs and building the necessary infrastructure for this as well as robust digital systems and fostering research initiatives. Additionally, it is essential to allocate the correct budget for each sector of healthcare. By implementing world-class screening measures for Dubai residents, we will ensure a healthier population that lives longer. Technology should help to reduce the overall costs of healthcare in the

future. This will further enhance the sustainability of the health sector.

Mental health is a growing concern globally. Is enough being done here to tackle this growing disease area?

As you mentioned, mental health is a global concern, and its prevalence continues to rise annually. A wide range of mental conditions such as addictions, depression and anxiety require attention. In Dubai, we aim to tackle this problem across all age groups, from paediatric years to adults and senior populations. Throughout the entire life cycle, the patient must receive the necessary support to maintain strong mental health. We are focusing on long-term care and rehabilitation and for this are adopting a holistic approach across all age groups and areas of care.

Digital health has long been a hot topic in Dubai. What is your expert assessment of the current system in place?

In Dubai, the DHA has implemented a paperless system that establishes an integrated patient file, connecting the public and private sectors and facilitating communication between hospitals. We aim to expand this integration to create a large pool of information, functioning like a central data bank, accessible to patients and healthcare providers. This comprehensive data repository will enhance healthcare quality and efficiency. Furthermore, we will be able to use this information to develop evidence-based preventative public health strategies and we will be able to utilize it for research to better patient care and wellbeing.

Beyond digital health initiatives, we are actively seeking to bring new technologies to the market to improve patient outcomes. For example, in areas such as orthopaedics, we will have innovations that shorten the duration of the rehabilitation period, thereby improving patient recovery. Another technology utilizes AI-powered lenses in endoscopies, enabling the creation of enhanced images that are clearer to the human eye. This advancement empowers doctors to draw more accurate conclusions. These are just some examples that improve the lives of patients by optimising outcomes and quality of care.

How are you leveraging Dubai’s status as a major regional hub with a world-class healthcare system to attract further investment?

For the last five years, we have made remarkable progress in attracting healthcare tourism, especially in the fields of plastic surgery and dentistry. We have attracted and brought over world-class physicians and professionals to the market, ensuring that patients and expats receive the highest quality of care. On top of that, international organisations, like Kings College, have established operations in Dubai, further enhancing the healthcare landscape.

Another important point is that Dubai is a diversified market that is extremely cosmopolitan, and the UAE is in a central geographical position with an amazing infrastructure that makes it an ideal place for private companies to have regional hubs for the MENA and GCC regions. In some cases, they are even positioning Dubai as their global hub, which highlights the city's significance as a strategic base for international operations.

How do you attract investors to Dubai and what are your goals in the upcoming years?

One of our future goals is to increase the GDP percentage allocated to healthcare from the current 4.2 percent. This will be through FDI, so attracting more international players to Dubai will be key while also undertaking more PPP Projects. Furthermore, we are dedicated to improving healthcare outcomes in areas such as oncology, mental health and long-term rehabilitation.

To attract the necessary investment, we are working with the Dubai Economy and Tourism Department and with the free zones. Equally, we are actively participating in conferences and exhibitions and engaging with relevant stakeholders. The investment guide we produced has gained a lot of traction with the international community, though we know there are still many steps required to fully realize our goals. We encourage anyone interested in Dubai to explore the possibilities first-hand and do not hesitate to seek our guidance and advice. Come and explore for yourself the many advantages Dubai has to offer.

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