

# Aisha Abdulla Al Mulla - Director, Friends of Cancer Patients (FoCP), UAE

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*Friends of Cancer Patients (FoCP) is a non-profit organisation, founded in 1999, that supports cancer patients, their families, donors, and the overall community in the UAE. Director Aisha Abdulla Al Mulla highlights some of the FoCP's key initiatives around early cancer detection and screening, where the UAE's patient advocacy landscape stands today, and how well-integrated the patient voice is in the country's drug reimbursement process.*

## **Can you share your story and how you came to be involved in cancer patient advocacy?**

I was previously the Director of Programmes at The Big Heart Foundation (TBHF) – the Sharjah-based humanitarian organisation that helps forcibly displaced populations worldwide, where I developed humanitarian assistance programmes. TBHF and Friends of Cancer Patients (FoCP), both operating under Sharjah's Her Highness Executive Office (HHEO), exemplify the interconnectedness of organisational work aimed at improving the quality of life for refugees, patients, youth, and many others.

Deeply inspired by the dedication of Her Highness Sheikha Jawaher bint Mohammed Al Qasimi, the Founder and Patron of FoCP, and motivated by FoCP's remarkable efforts in positively impacting the lives of cancer patients, I became eager to join their noble cause. Over the past decade, my duties have brought about a profound transformation in me, instilling a strong desire to make a

difference in the lives of cancer patients and their families.

I firmly believe that everyone, regardless of their financial situation or social status, deserves equal access to quality cancer care. I am driven by an unwavering passion to create meaningful changes in the lives of cancer patients and their families.

**Can you elaborate on FoCP, its history, key activities, and the goals it aims to achieve?**

Established in 1999, FoCP has been valiantly supporting cancer patients, their families, as well as caregivers. Our key activities and initiatives encompass a wide range of efforts, including organising awareness campaigns, offering financial and emotional support, and advocating for improved access through the betterment of healthcare policies for all affected, as well as rallying support for stronger cancer research and funding. With our mission to champion accessible and comprehensive cancer care, we strive to promote early detection, reduce stigma, engage the community, and enhance the well-being of patients and survivors, bringing hope and positivity to every warrior that is involved in the fight against cancer.

FoCP champions several pivotal awareness campaigns and we have made a considerable contribution in this area. The most impact-creating among them is the pan-UAE breast cancer awareness campaign, The **Pink Caravan Ride**. Each year, the campaign unites thousands of volunteers, equestrians and medical practitioners, and public and private sector partners to offer free breast screenings to women and men across the seven emirates, and highlights to them that early detection can save lives.

**Relay for Life** has quickly become a highlight in the calendar as an engaging fundraising event that supports cancer research and treatment and actively gathers people for the cause. **Kashf**, which means “detection” in Arabic, and the now famous **Pink Caravan** initiative has a big focus on the early detection of cancer, with Pink Caravan involving the entire nation through our annual procession to raise awareness about breast cancer in men and women, and **SHANAB** to address prostate and testicular cancers in men. Our incredible **ANA** initiative focuses on empowering paediatric cancer patients and raising awareness about the early signs of childhood cancer. Lastly, **SKIN HEALTH**, endorsed by the UAE Ministry of Health, advocates for skin cancer awareness and emphasises the importance of sun protection as well as early detection.

We have initiated various programmes that fall under the community engagement department to address the emotional needs of cancer patients. These moral support programmes focus on

enhancing the quality of life of young cancer patients suffering from childhood cancers while fostering positive mindsets. Among them, **Locks of Hope** plays an essential role in restoring self-esteem and confidence among patients. This programme offers wigs to those who have lost their hair due to chemotherapy, while Birthday for a Cause encourages people to donate gifts to cancer patients on their birthdays.

These initiatives that we put all our hearts and efforts into collectively contribute to the well-being of cancer patients, while also amplifying the understanding and significance of cancer awareness. They truly deserve widespread support as we continue to make a substantial impact in the fight against cancer.

### **Cancer is the third-leading cause of death in the UAE. How does FoCP provide support regarding this matter?**

As mentioned earlier, we lead extensive awareness campaigns to educate the public about the risks, prevention, and importance of early detection. We strive to increase knowledge and promote a proactive approach towards cancer prevention and healthy lifestyles. We also provide moral and financial support to cancer patients and their families, offering assistance throughout their treatment journey.

FoCP advocates for improved cancer care and policies at the local and national levels and we work closely with healthcare institutions, policymakers, and stakeholders to ensure the development and implementation of effective strategies as well as programmes for cancer prevention, treatment, and support.

We also do a great deal to support cancer research initiatives to advance scientific understanding, enhance treatment options, and improve outcomes for cancer patients. Collaborating with research institutions and funding studies, we aspire to aid in discovering breakthroughs in cancer treatment and care.

FoCP proactively strengthens partnerships with local and international organisations, healthcare providers, and government entities to enhance cancer care and support networks. We believe that through collaboration, we leverage resources, expertise, and knowledge to create a comprehensive and coordinated approach to addressing cancer in the UAE.

## **How is the topic of cancer being viewed by the government, societies and science in the UAE today?**

The UAE government has shown a strong commitment to addressing cancer through initiatives such as the UAE Cancer Control Plan, which is being prepared in line with the WHO and EMRO framework, with defined objectives and goals.

FoCP has been instrumental in engaging society through various initiatives, including awareness campaigns, support programmes, and fundraising events. We collaborate with community organisations, businesses, and individuals to mobilise support, spread awareness, and create a supportive environment for cancer patients and their families.

We make sure to actively collaborate with leading scientific institutions and research centres to drive advancements in cancer prevention, diagnosis, and treatment. Our partnerships enable us to leverage scientific expertise, participate in clinical trials, and contribute to the global knowledge of cancer care.

Our awareness campaigns have played a vital role in educating the public about cancer prevention, early detection, and treatment options. We have established support programmes to provide emotional and psychological support to cancer patients, enhancing their overall well-being.

## **To what extent is the patient voice taken into account in the overall UAE healthcare ecosystem? How open are public and private stakeholders to entering into conversations with patient advocacy groups?**

We offer personalised support services, including emotional and psychological counselling, to help cancer patients navigate their journey and cope with the challenges they face. Through various programmes and initiatives, we create a platform for patients to share their experiences, raise awareness about their needs, and advocate for their rights.

FoCP acts as a mediator, bridging the gap between cancer patients and relevant stakeholders, including healthcare providers and government entities, to ensure their concerns are addressed and their voices are heard. Through our efforts, public and private stakeholders are becoming increasingly open to conversations with patient advocacy groups such as ours. We are always steadfast when considering the voice of patients in decision-making and ensuring patient-centred care.

**Globally, patient groups are set to be more present in policymaking and drug reimbursement decision-making. How have you seen this evolve in the UAE, and what road is left to travel for full integration of the patient voice?**

In the UAE, there has been positive progress in involving patient groups in policy-making and drug reimbursement decisions, but there is always more to be done. The patient voice is increasingly recognised as crucial in shaping healthcare policies, and we always strive to amplify those voices. Further steps are needed to establish formal channels for patient advocacy groups to actively participate in discussions and collaborate with policymakers and full integration of the patient voice requires continued efforts to address diverse patient needs.

**What are some of the key challenges faced by cancer patients in the UAE, and what steps are being taken to address them?**

Cancer casts a great burden on patients and can often cause additional challenges like financial burden, limited access to specialised care, stigma, and psychological distress. The steps we take at FoCP to support those in need include providing financial support, counselling services, and our many awareness programmes that have multiple positive effects. Through our efforts we focus on improving access to comprehensive cancer care, enhancing insurance coverage, reducing stigma, and promoting mental health support so that no challenge is too great and that patients can put their energy into what matters the most, becoming cancer free.

**Are there any specific upcoming initiatives, events, or campaigns by FoCP that you would like to highlight?**

FoCP has upcoming initiatives, events, and campaigns to support cancer patients and raise awareness. Notable events include our annual Zakat campaign during Ramadan and the upcoming moral support activation during Eid Al Adha, where we distribute Kiswat Al Eid and Eidiyas donated by individuals and organisations. FoCP will continue organising awareness campaigns like the Pink Caravan Ride held every year around February, and initiatives tailored to different demographics as we continue in our mission to realise a cancer-free future.

## **How can individuals and organisations get involved and support the work of FoCP in its mission to raise cancer awareness and support patients?**

Individuals and organisations can actively support FoCP's work in various ways. Participation in awareness events and campaigns, financial contributions, volunteering time and skills, and collaboration on initiatives are key ways to get involved. Sharing information about FoCP's work, spreading awareness about cancer prevention and early detection, and supporting cancer patients in local communities are also valuable contributions. We would not be able to make the impact that we do without the help of our leaders, government entities, private organisations, communities, and individuals. Together we can triumph over any hurdle in our way and bring joy and strength to all, especially those that need it the most.

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