Omer Abdel Rahman – CEO, Burjeel Hospital



The UAE is a country that is not waiting for the future but shaping it

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Burjeel Hospital is one of Abu Dhabi's leading private healthcare facilities, and - as CEO Omer Abdel Rahman explains - is at the forefront of pushing forward medical innovation and excellence in the UAE. He outlines how continuous government investment and collaboration is driving the country's healthcare to new heights, some of the key collaborations between his institution and the state - including on the Emirates Mars Mission initiative -, and his commitment to providing access to innovative therapies for all.

Having studied and worked in healthcare across the world, how would you compare your experience in countries like France, the US, and the UK with that in the UAE?

My experience of healthcare practice and healthcare systems in the UAE has been amazing. In many ways, the UAE has taken the best aspects of healthcare services from various countries and incorporated them into their bespoke healthcare service and patient experience.

My experience with European and North American countries has been that they have fantastic organisational systems that help them cater to their large populations, but they’re missing some measures regarding qualitative care. The UAE is a culturally diverse country and uses our interpersonal skills to provide the needed human interaction skills to deliver high-quality care with professionalism and essence of humanity.

As the CEO of a region-renowned hospital such as Burjeel, what do you see as the most formative experiences in your career trajectory that led you to this point?

Being of service to humankind has always been the driving force behind my ambitions to pursue a career in healthcare. Witnessing the importance of civic duty in UAE culture, the country will always hold a special place in my heart and serve as a point of reference to maintain my drive.

I spent my childhood and adolescent years growing up in Abu Dhabi. At the time, the UAE did not have medical schools, so through government-supported programs, I attended university abroad. After completing my medical degree, I embarked on a journey of accredited professional training: fellowships at the Royal College of Surgery of England and the Royal Colleges of Glasgow, Edinburgh, and Ireland. Eager to further my academic career, I graduated from University College London with a Master's in Surgical Sciences and then obtained a Ph.D. in medical management at Hartford.

Later, I began working at Cleveland Clinic in the United States under the mentorship of Steven Wexner in the esteemed laparoscopic colorectal surgery program. This program put me at the forefront of innovation and specialized knowledge in, a then, emerging surgical practice. Learning from and with future world-renowned surgeons expanded my network and exposed me to the international arena of healthcare excellence.

Upon returning to the United Kingdom, I gradually advanced my career through the National Health Service. At the peak of my public career, I became the Head of Surgery and the elected NHS governor for the East Anglia region. In addition to my public work, I built a reputable independent practice where I provided pro-bono services and treated patients from around the world with complex cases. During this phase of my career, I experienced first-hand how large hospitals functioned from a management perspective and how the private sector can work synergistically with the public sector to deliver optimal health outcomes and patient experience for all patients.

In 2015, I joined the Burjeel group as one of the leading general and colorectal surgeons in the country. In 2021, the hospital's owner, Dr. Shamsheer, and the executive team asked me to become the Chief Executive Officer of Burjeel. Accepting this position, I welcomed the responsibility and was humbled by the trust and support of the entire Burjeel team.

On reflection, I can see how all these experiences have lent to my position: my connection to the UAE, commitment to continual improvement, adaptation to new contexts, unwavering interest in research and academia, and seasoned industry expertise.

Success is not just a destination; it is an ongoing journey.

To begin the process of constructing a business from the ground up requires human expertise, and in a smaller population like that of the UAE this can be difficult to find. How do you go about finding the right people for the hospital?

In any hospital, a great team makes all the difference between providing good and great healthcare services. The UAE stands as one of the most diverse nations globally, and it is vital that our hospitals reflect this reality. At Burjeel, we have a team representing 36 nationalities, speaking 56 languages, with more than half of our employees being women. Embracing diversity, we place deep value on adaptivity, social agility, and emotional intelligence to ensure a positive holistic workplace experience and excellent patient care.

As a hospital based in the UAE, it is important for us to ensure we are providing all the services our population may need. To ensure consistent excellence in our services, Burjeel employs a research team to assess the country’s healthcare demands. This team works closely with the Human Resources department to identify specialized doctors, world-class physicians, and other professionals who could potentially join the Burjeel team and contribute to our commitment to providing excellent healthcare services.

There is a scarcity of nurses globally, especially after COVID. How do you navigate this issue?

Nurses play one of the most crucial roles in hospitals and the world, as the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted on the global stage. On behalf of the entire medical community, we express our heartfelt gratitude to all the nurses for their unwavering dedication and hard work.

Given the global scarcity of nurses, it is imperative for the medical field to continually and sincerely acknowledge the pivotal role they play. At Burjeel, we take immense pride in appreciating and valuing all our staff, including nurses. Healthcare is a complex field, and seamless coordination and collaboration are vital. We strive to ensure that all staff members, including nurses, work cohesively towards the same clear vision and goals. By fostering a positive work environment and encouraging growth and professional development, we have managed to retain a strong nursing team.

Moreover, we actively recognize and celebrate the achievements of our staff and their continued contributions to our shared visions and goals. This approach has not only created a good work environment but also fostered camaraderie, friendship, and loyalty among our team. We firmly believe that supporting and uplifting our nurses ultimately results in better healthcare provision and outcomes for our patients.

Some people are sceptical about healthcare tourism's potential in the UAE, believing the costs involved will not justify the volumes it will bring. Do you believe healthcare tourism is worth the squeeze in Dubai?

Yes. As a country and society, the UAE aims to be the best in what it can provide, meaning, world-class healthcare is not only a current pursuit but a continuous ambition. Investment in the healthcare industry is happening and the benefit of it will be seen in the immediate, intermediate, and long term.

The justification for investing in healthcare tourism in the UAE is grounded in social benefits (population healthcare demand), environmental impacts (reducing carbon footprint), and socio-economic benefits (opening our doors to servicing the international community).

By providing world-class healthcare in the UAE, we will not only better serve our local and resident community in the UAE, but also become a viable option for our neighbouring countries and closer proximity countries to consider us rather than going to further destinations such as Europe and North America. Furthermore, the amazing airports in the UAE are equipped and suitably placed to allow for the ease of patient travel and the shorter travel distances also lend to decreasing the carbon expenditure of long-haul flights. From a patient tourism perspective, it is more cost-effective to receive care in the UAE without compromising the quality and offering a higher service in many cases.

Healthcare insurers here provide different levels of coverage based on the scheme an individual is on. How does Burjeel make sure all patients can access the services you provide?

Burjeel's unwavering vision is to ensure access to quality care for all individuals. To achieve this goal, the Burjeel group has developed a diverse range of healthcare facilities that offer excellent medical services to people with financial capacities or insurance coverage in mind.

In the rare event that a patient needs to go to a different centre, Burjeel collaborates closely with trusted partners to ensure our patients receive the support they need. These partnerships enable us to maintain a seamless continuum of care, ensuring our patients' well-being is always the top priority.

Does the level of care provided to blue-collar workers reach these same standards?

The level of care at all Burjeel owned and operated hospitals are maintained at a high quality and standard for all patients.

The profits for the hospital have steadily been rising. What is the reason behind this?

Burjeel's success stems from our team's exceptional ability to follow and adapt our plans, leading to real, measurable, and steady progress in achieving our goals. The key contributing factor to this success is the trust our patients place in us. As one of the leading healthcare facilities in the UAE, patients consistently choose to receive care from us over other healthcare providers.

From an employee perspective, we prioritize maintaining high morale by offering growth and leadership opportunities, as well as enjoyable moments at work. Consequently, this approach reduces employee turnover and ensures the provision of top-quality care to patients who value a familiar medical team.

Moreover, at Burjeel, we embrace change. We welcome innovations that promote growth and enhanced efficiency. Our ability to adapt swiftly and precisely enables us to generate savings where possible and invest in areas that promise future benefits.

You mentioned you are shaping the future. How receptive is the government to being part of this change?

The UAE is a nation that places great importance on innovation and excellence, and this commitment extends to businesses, including Burjeel, which are actively encouraged and supported by the government to foster innovation.

An example of the UAE and Burjeel's joint dedication to innovation is our involvement with the Emirates Mars Mission initiative. It has been an absolute honour to collaborate with the Mars team

on research and medical aspects relevant to the expedition to Mars. This opportunity has allowed us to contribute our expertise and be part of a groundbreaking mission that showcases the UAE's commitment to pushing the boundaries of exploration and scientific advancement.

At Burjeel, we are driven by the pursuit of excellence, and such initiatives exemplify our commitment to pushing the boundaries of medical knowledge and service to benefit not only the UAE but also humanity as a whole.

The UAE is an emerging Research & Development hub and the country has propelled the investment in R&D by entering into the global innovation ecosystem through clinical trials. How is Burjeel participating in these operations?

Burjeel is one of the leading clinical research institutes in the Middle East. Through partnerships with large biopharma companies, Burjeel has been able to contribute to efforts in research and development. For the country to take this next step and become a clinical hub we need to attract experts, and we all doing our best to make that happen!

What is your assessment of the UAE pharmaceutical market?

The UAE have a present and growing pharmaceutical industry, with the country producing a large sum of medicines being distributed within the nation. We are now going into the next level of therapy production by setting up sites to manufacture rare disease and oncology medications, which is great.

The idea of building a sustainable and "self-owned" biopharma industry in the UAE is fantastic.

Can you talk about how Burjeel Hospital has provided access to innovative therapies?

Finding solutions and helping people lie at the core of Burjeel's health mission. Despite the fact that innovative therapies often cater to a small portion of the population and come at a significant cost, a major justification for investing in research, production, and distribution of these therapies is rooted in our value for human life and the quality of living for all individuals, including those living with rare diseases and complex ailments.

For numerous patients facing challenging or novel health issues, innovative therapies are essential. Through our strong relationships with charities and philanthropic groups, we have been able to utilize donations to support the payment for these innovative therapies. Additionally, at the pharmaceutical level, certain companies have provided us with medication at reduced costs to mitigate the expenses associated with delivering these innovative solutions and therapies.

There is a plan in place for the digitalization of data in the UAE. How does Burjeel plan to digitalize?

The digitalization of data is an inevitable evolution across all industries, including healthcare facilities. At Burjeel, we are committed to digitizing records in a safe, secure, and government-mandated manner, guaranteeing utmost privacy and confidentiality for all patient data. Digitalisation will contribute to an efficient and streamlined healthcare experience while maintaining the highest standards of data security.

There is a movement to create specialist hospitals for areas like oncology in the UAE. Do you think this is possible?

It is possible and will happen. Specialized disease centers, including Oncology, are a natural progression for growing healthcare hubs like the UAE. As the population and healthcare tourism industry expand, expect more of these centers to emerge, delivering advanced and specialized care.

What do you see as the next part of the agenda for the UAE in the future?

The UAE is experiencing a shift in expatriate timelines. In the past, expatriates moved to the UAE during their working ages but now, expatriates love the country, have made a good life here, and do not want to leave it. In addition to this, younger families are choosing to move here and raise their kids as well as pensioners immigrating to the UAE to live their golden years here. I believe healthcare will need to become more organized (with specialized centers), more complex (with nuance and culturally specific services, treatments, and innovative therapies), and will need to begin catering to an aging population.

There is no one other country that I can think of that is up to this change. The UAE is a country that is not waiting for the future but shaping it.

The UAE’s forward-thinking mindset positions the country as a pioneer in adapting its healthcare system to cater to the diverse and evolving needs of its residents and expatriates alike. As the future unfolds, I am immensely excited and proud to be part of the UAE’s journey in medical advancements and healthcare. Together, we are shaping a healthier tomorrow for all.

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