Humaid Al-Shamsi – Director, Burjeel Oncology GCC



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As the UAE's only gastrointestinal oncologist, Professor Humaid Al-Shamsi is well-placed to comment on the evolution of cancer care in the country, noting massive leaps forward in terms of technology, patient experience, and regulatory timelines. Looking forward, Professor Al-Shamsi calls for even greater investment into oncology R&D programs as the UAE continues its journey to becoming a globally leading healthcare hub.

Can you introduce yourself, and tell us about your work and mission?

I serve as a professor of Oncology at both Gulf Medical University and the University of Sharjah, and it is with great humility that I acknowledge the distinction of being the first Emirati to hold this prestigious title in the field of oncology, a realm I have ardently dedicated myself to for numerous years. My academic journey commenced with the completion of my undergraduate degree at University College Cork in Ireland in the year 2005.

Following this, my path led me to Canada, where I received comprehensive training in internal medicine and subsequently earned certifications from both the American and Canadian boards as an internal medicine consultant. My pursuit of knowledge and specialization continued as I delved into oncology, ultimately achieving board certification as an oncologist in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom. Further refining my expertise, I embarked on specialized fellowship training within the niche domain of Gastrointestinal (GI) Oncology.

Presently, I proudly stand as the only GI oncologist in the UAE, tending to the diverse spectrum of GI cancers. This intricate field encompasses afflictions of the oesophagus, stomach, pancreas, colon, and rectum, each demanding the nuanced and expert care that I am committed to providing.

I hold the position of Director of Oncology Services at the Burjeel Cancer Institute and Burjeel Oncology GCC. Our institute operates oncology services in seven different centers, establishing us as the leading cancer care provider in the UAE. Notably, the Burjeel Cancer Institute boasts the largest assembly of oncologists in the region, with a team of 19 experts. Our distinctive advantage lies in our extensive network of centres throughout the UAE, which enables us to bring cancer care directly to patients, sparing them the burden of extensive travel.

At present, I serve as Chairman of the Oncology-Hematology Fellowship Training Program in the UAE, a responsibility undertaken in collaboration with the National Health Institute of Specialties to establish standards for oncology training in the UAE.

In addition to my administrative role, I am an active researcher, with a portfolio that comprises more than 110 peer-reviewed publications. My contributions have been recognized with multiple awards at both national and international levels in the fields of oncology and research. My unwavering mission has consistently revolved around enhancing the quality of cancer care in the UAE, driven by the overarching goal of delivering the finest care possible to my patients.

To underscore our dedication, we can point to several successful initiatives. First, we've established a robust network for comprehensive cancer care that spans the entirety of the UAE. Second, our achievement of being the first in the UAE to attain accreditation from the European Society of Medical Oncology for our comprehensive cancer centre sets us apart. Third, we've pioneered the sole comprehensive bone marrow transplantation program in the country, catering to both adults and children and have successfully conducted 80 such procedures with an outstanding 98 percent success rate.

Typically, a bone marrow transplantation unit handles only 10 to 15 cases annually, yet we've accomplished 80 within two years. This achievement mirrors our unwavering commitment to providing the highest level of care for our patients within the country, sparing them the need to seek treatment abroad.

In alignment with our dedication to research, we engage in collaborations on an international and local scale, partnering with prominent institutions like MD Anderson, among others in the United States and Europe, to elevate the UAE's profile on the global research stage.

Notably, the UAE boasts one of the world's fastest approval processes for cancer medications. Many drugs approved in the United States become available in the UAE within just a month or less. This serves as a testament to the UAE government's unwavering commitment to ensuring the best possible treatment options for its patients and population.

How has the cancer patient journey evolved in the UAE?

A decade ago, cancer patients in the UAE would rely on government-sponsored trips to countries like the United States, United Kingdom, Europe, Singapore, or Korea for their treatment. However, in the past ten years, we have observed a remarkable transformation. The UAE government has invested in prominent institutions like the Cleveland Clinic and Mayo Clinic, bringing them here to establish comprehensive healthcare programs. Additionally, we've seen the emergence of homegrown prominent healthcare brands such as Burjeel Holdings, and various other entities that deliver top-tier cancer care to patients.

Today, the UAE possesses all the cutting-edge technology, skilled healthcare professionals, and access to advanced medications needed to offer patients high-quality care right here in their own country.

Lately, there has been a notable change in the healthcare landscape, with several UAE hospitals now offering palliative and supportive care services. It's worth noting that there is a misconception surrounding palliative care, as it's often erroneously associated solely with end-of-life care. In reality, palliative care plays a crucial role in alleviating patients' symptoms and ultimately contributes to better overall outcomes, underscoring its significant importance.

Furthermore, there have been marked improvements in the timelines for medication registration. Now, medicines can receive approval in as little as three weeks. This expedited approval process means that patients no longer need to travel to access new medications.

In conclusion, there has been a substantial change in the perspective of regulatory bodies when it comes to research, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. There is now a faster pace of approval for research proposals. The approvals now take as little as one week. This shift aligns with the UAE government's overarching vision of positioning the country as a central hub for research and innovation.

What areas could be improved or promoted to achieve this government goal of becoming a hub for healthcare?

I believe there’s room for enhancement in research and development (R&D) funding. This has much changed in the last few years with the establishment of robust research organizations in the UAE and the GCC. Also, regulations have seen notable improvements recently. Over the past three years, particularly since the onset of COVID-19, regulations have undergone significant changes, with the UAE emerging as a focal point for vaccine trials.

The UAE has the capability and science to conduct research, so how could it be encouraged here?

There are multiple avenues for promoting research in the UAE. To begin with, offering additional valuable and practical resources to physicians can motivate healthcare providers to engage in clinical trials within the UAE. Secondly, by raising awareness about the significance of research and dispelling misconceptions surrounding clinical trials. Thirdly, nurturing research within the country can be fostered through streamlined approval processes, endorsing initiatives, establishing additional centres of excellence, and addressing disparities in global versus local pharmaceutical funding.

Is the UAE ready for new cell therapies, such as CAR-T therapy?

The country is well-prepared for CAR-T Cell therapy. Just recently, a centre in Abu Dhabi achieved a significant milestone by successfully producing the first CAR-T cells locally in the UAE to treat a leukaemia patient. This achievement in CAR-T therapy signifies a significant step forward in our dedication to making a substantial regional impact.

What are your hopes for the oncology landscape in the next five years? What are the ideal achievements for the UAE?

Our aspiration for the next five years is to establish additional accredited centres of excellence within the country, offering cutting-edge medical procedures and more palliative and quality-of-life centres in the UAE.

The UAE’s healthcare sector stands on several foundational pillars that position it as a prominent healthcare destination. This is primarily due to robust governmental backing and direction, coupled with advanced healthcare infrastructure, state-of-the-art facilities, and a highly skilled workforce in the UAE.

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