

Ayman Abdo - SVP, Fakeeh Care Group



We are working towards creating a private sector ecosystem that can cater to broader healthcare transformation

11.06.2024

Tags: [Saudi Arabia](#), [GCC](#), [MEA](#), [MENA](#), [Fakeeh Care Group](#)

Prof. Ayman Abdo, SVP of Saudi private healthcare cornerstone Fakeeh Care Group, outlines the group's large range of activities, encompassing a network of hospitals, home care services, ambulance systems, and an IT company, as well as its own medical, nursing and pharmacy schools. He shares his current focus on Public-Private Partnership (PPP) as the kingdom's Vision 2030 looks to redefine the role of the private sector in public healthcare programmes and increase healthcare delivery from the private sector to some 40 percent.

Could you start by providing a brief overview of your career trajectory, and the scope of your current role?

I started my medical education at King Saud University in Saudi Arabia, followed by residency and fellowships in internal medicine and gastroenterology in Vancouver and Calgary, Canada. Upon acquiring American and Canadian board certifications, along with a liver transplant fellowship, I returned to the university in 2003 as a professor of medicine until 2016. During this time, my focus primarily was on teaching and research, leading to the creation of the Liver Disease Research Centre and publication of more than 150 scientific papers. I was also the vice dean for quality and development and then postgraduate education in the college of Medicine at King Saud University for 7 years.

Subsequently, in 2006, I assumed the role of secretary general at the Saudi Commission for Health Specialties, overseeing healthcare practitioners regulation and postgraduate medical education in Saudi Arabia. After departing from this position, I joined Fakeeh Care Group as the Senior VP and CEO of the Riyadh hospital, before transitioning to concentrate on strategy, innovation, and business development. Additionally, I supervise subsidiaries including an IT company, homecare company, and medical equipment company. While my clinical practice has significantly decreased, I still maintain patient care to stay connected to the field.

Is the model of pursuing medical education in Saudi Arabia followed by further specialization abroad still common among young Saudis today?

The trend has evolved over time. In the past, individuals pursued medical education abroad, but now, with the robust Saudi Board system, many opt to complete their residency locally. However, there is still a need for specialized training, leading to fellowships abroad in areas like some subspecialized medicine or advanced surgical techniques. Saudi Arabia has seen a significant increase in highly trained medical professionals, with thousands graduating from local programs and contributing to specialized fields previously limited in the country. This transformation within a relatively short timeframe is truly remarkable.

Could you provide an overview of the Fakeeh Care Group for our international audience, detailing its history, scope, and focus areas?

The Fakeeh Care Group holds a significant legacy in Saudi Arabia's private healthcare sector, tracing its roots back to the establishment of the first private hospital in Jeddah around 46 years ago by the late Dr. Suleiman Fakeeh himself. This pioneering institution has achieved numerous milestones in healthcare, including conducting the first kidney transplant, heart transplant, and IVF procedures in the private sector in the country. Notably, the group's virologist discovered the first Middle East Coronavirus, preceding the current COVID-19 pandemic. Presently, the group operates a network of hospitals in Jeddah, Riyadh, Neom, and Dubai, with an upcoming facility in Medina, collectively serving up to two million patients annually and offering comprehensive primary, secondary, and tertiary care services, including advanced treatments such as robotic surgery, transplants and cancer care.

Beyond hospital care, the group has diversified its services to encompass an ecosystem of healthcare delivery, incorporating our home care services, ambulance systems, and an IT company, alongside a robust supply chain infrastructure. Furthermore, the group has a strong commitment to education, with its own medical school, nursing school, pharmacy school, and allied health sciences programs, contributing to the development of healthcare professionals in the region. The colleges host more than 14 programs between bachelor's, master's, and PhD programmes. Additionally, the group has a track record in hospital management, having previously operated healthcare systems in various locations.

In essence, the Fakeeh Care Group operates as an integrated healthcare system with a strong academic foundation and a focus on technological innovation. The group remains at the forefront of healthcare delivery, education, and research, embodying its commitment to excellence and advancement in the field. In testimony for that, Dr. Sulaiman Fakeeh hospital in Jeddah has ranked as the best private hospital in the famous Newsweek statistica best hospitals ranking survey in the years 2022, 2023, and 2024.

Could you share your personal experience transitioning from a medical background to the realm of business development within the healthcare sector, and shed light on the strategic initiatives driving revenue growth for the company today?

Transitioning from a academic/ regulatory and governmental background to the business sector has been an enlightening journey for me. Previously, the conventional belief was that either healthcare administrators or practitioners should lead hospitals. However, current understanding emphasizes the value of a blend between administrative expertise and medical knowledge, with a strong emphasis on passion and experience in both realms.

In my role, I primarily focus on Public-Private Partnership (PPP) projects, which are pivotal for advancing healthcare development. Despite the private sector currently contributing only about 12 percent to healthcare delivery, vision 2030 goal is to significantly increase this to around 40 percent. This ambitious objective involves several strategic approaches, each aiming to bridge the gap between private sector involvement and public healthcare needs.

One key strategy involves redefining the role of the private sector in public health programs, traditionally deemed financially unsustainable due to their preventive nature. We are exploring innovative models to demonstrate the long-term cost-effectiveness of preventive initiatives, such as screenings and preventive programs, working in partnership with insurance companies and

payers. This entails convincing them of the substantial cost savings and health benefits that can be achieved in the long run.

Furthermore, we are actively supporting healthcare clusters by identifying and addressing gaps in services that may be financially unfeasible for them to provide independently. By acting as a “shadow clusters,” the private sector can step in to deliver services that are vital for community health but may not be economically viable for public healthcare institutions.

In addition to PPP projects, we are also seizing opportunities presented by mega projects, such as wellness centers and innovation hubs. These initiatives allow for private sector investment in specialized areas like genomics, sports medicine, and aviation medicine, which may not receive significant attention from the public sector. By tapping into these areas of expertise, we can drive innovation and improve healthcare outcomes.

Education is another critical aspect of our business development strategy. Recent advancements, such as accelerated nursing programs tailored to specific healthcare needs, are revolutionizing the way we train healthcare professionals. By offering flexible and efficient training options, we can address critical workforce shortages and ensure that healthcare providers are equipped with the skills needed to meet evolving healthcare demands.

Moreover, our focus on innovation extends beyond traditional healthcare delivery models. We are exploring personalized healthcare and wellness concepts that prioritize individual goals and preferences. By aligning healthcare interventions with each person’s unique aspirations and needs, we can enhance quality of life and promote longevity.

In summary, my journey from medicine to business has been shaped by a commitment to advancing healthcare through strategic partnerships, innovative models, and personalized approaches. By leveraging the strengths of both the public and private sectors, we can address current healthcare challenges and pave the way for a healthier future.

How do you envision the evolution of private healthcare in Saudi Arabia? Are there initiatives in place to extend access to lower-income segments of the population and ensure that innovative healthcare approaches reach a broader demographic?

The landscape of healthcare in Saudi Arabia is undergoing significant transformation, marked by a strong move to prevention, value based care, automation, and robust governance and efficient systems, in addition to gradual convergence of private and public healthcare sectors. Currently,

there are approximately 12.5 million insured individuals in the country, a figure expected to rise to 20 million by 2030. This growth can be attributed to various factors, including the privatization of sectors previously under public sector, ambitious privatization programs, tourists and visitors, in addition to Makkah and Madinah visitors.

Furthermore, the gradual shift towards a integrated healthcare system aims to minimize out-of-pocket expenses for patients, and provide a holistic, comprehensive, citizen focused care to all.

Overall, the envisioned convergence of private and public healthcare systems in Saudi Arabia represents a pivotal step towards enhancing healthcare accessibility, improving service quality, and fostering sustainable healthcare delivery models. By leveraging the strengths of both sectors and promoting collaboration, the healthcare landscape in Saudi Arabia aims to meet the evolving needs of its population while ensuring equitable access to quality care.

You mentioned your involvement in research and development, and the National Biotech Strategy aims to position Saudi Arabia as an R&D hub for the region. Can you elaborate on the role of organizations like yours in helping achieve this goal?

Traditionally, the private sector has not played a significant role in research and development in Saudi Arabia, mainly due to capital investment requirements. However, our organization is different as we have been heavily investing in education through our health colleges. So far, we have focused on research at the undergraduate and postgraduate level, with research chairs in diabetes and addiction medicine. We are also finalizing agreements with other institutions to establish our own healthcare innovation department and sandbox. While these are early steps, they indicate our commitment to research and development. Regulatory hurdles, particularly in clinical trials, have been a challenge, but we are now seeing increased government involvement and investment in R&D, with plans to allocate more of GDP to research and development. It is essential to strike the right balance between academia and industry involvement in research, and we are working towards helping to achieving that balance. While we are still in the early stages, Saudi Arabia has a track record of rapid development, and we are optimistic about the future of research and development in the country.

What message would you like to convey to potential international partners and our global audience about your institution?

I think we are embarking on a huge growth plan, both in healthcare delivery and healthcare modeling. I am very passionate about this, and it is important to highlight issues related to public health, wellness, and innovation in healthcare. This is a very important message for us because it is unique for us at Fakeeh, and we are investing a lot in it. We need to change the perception of the private sector. Often, it is seen as just boutique hospitals catering to the elite and offering expensive services. But we are working towards creating a private sector ecosystem that can cater to broader healthcare transformation.

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