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What excites me the most is the opportunity to help shape a future-ready healthcare system

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Dr Vineta Bhalla, Partner and Chief Medical Officer at Deloitte Middle East, brings a wealth of experience from her background as a clinician, public health expert, and healthcare leader in both Singapore and the UK. Bhalla shares her insights into Saudi Arabia's healthcare transformation, highlighting the Kingdom's methodical approach to building strong foundational blocks, such as digital infrastructure and regulatory frameworks, while steadily advancing towards more integrated and patient-centered care. She also notes the importance of remaining nimble and ready to review and redesign initiatives that may not deliver the intended outcomes—ensuring that as Saudi Arabia's healthcare sector evolves, it continually adapts to meet future challenges and global benchmarks.

Could you introduce yourself, including your areas of expertise and the career journey that led you to your current role at Deloitte?

I am the Chief Medical Officer and Partner in the Health and Human Services practice for Deloitte Middle East. I come from the industry side rather than a traditional advisory background. I am a clinician by training, holding two medical degrees—one in medicine and one in public health. Throughout my career, I have balanced clinical practice with broader healthcare transformation roles. This has helped me in always keeping the perspective and interest of patients and healthcare

service users at the center of everything I do.

Starting my healthcare management career as a Singapore civil servant, gave me rigorous training and hands-on experience in health financing, operations, and regulation. Undertaking various roles to help design a future-fit modern health system in Singapore, eventually, I was appointed Director General of Hospital Services in Singapore. In this role I oversaw public provider sector planning, capacity, operations, and private sector regulation. During that time, Singapore's healthcare system was evolving from focusing on acute responses to addressing chronic diseases, lifestyle-related conditions, and improving patient outcomes through integrated care.

In Singapore, I helped create healthcare clusters, supported accountable care organizations, and worked on national digital health initiatives like the National Emergency Management Response and the Life Science Grid. I also managed operational challenges, including SARS and H1N1 outbreaks, learning how to plan capacity and ensure preparedness. Many of the frameworks developed then proved useful during COVID.

After Singapore, I moved to the UK, where I advised the NHS. I reviewed community healthcare provision, ensuring long-term sustainability and eventually helped shape the future of community services. I later implemented these recommendations, focusing on out-of-hospital care. I also served as a Board Director for London North West Healthcare, overseeing quality and safety for millions of users across various providers. I contributed to establishing integrated care systems and acute care collaborations before being called back to national service during COVID as a clinical and public health lead, directing the UK's asymptomatic testing program.

Over time, I became familiar with the Middle East, supporting projects in Saudi Arabia, Abu Dhabi, and Qatar. This region's energy and leadership commitment to healthcare transformation attracted me. I realized that if I wanted to be part of a pivotal moment, I needed to be here rather than remain in Europe. I moved to the Middle East, joining Deloitte, which has an established presence and advisory role in the region's health and life sciences sector. My industry experience aligns with Deloitte's commitment to investing in and expanding its health and life sciences practice, making this an exciting opportunity to help shape the future of healthcare in the region.

What are the key trends you observe in the Kingdom's healthcare transformation?

Over the past few years, I have had the privilege of observing Saudi Arabia's health sector transformation firsthand. At the beginning, some doubted the Kingdom's ability to realize its

ambitious vision, questioning if they had the right resources, strategies, and policies. What I find remarkable is that, in the health and life sciences space, Saudi Arabia has moved forward methodically and thoughtfully, rather than making sudden, dramatic changes.

For example, Saudi Arabia did not immediately overhaul the role of the Ministry of Health. Instead, it articulated a clear end state and then mapped out a series of milestones and gateways to ensure that each step was carefully tested and validated. The creation of the Health Holding Company did not happen overnight. Instead, its mandate and resources were gradually defined and transferred. This measured approach allowed Saudi Arabia to identify and correct issues along the way, ensuring a more stable and effective transformation.

We see the same gradual and deliberate process with other entities, such as the Public Health Authority (PHA). They are following a phased roadmap, addressing challenges, and refining their strategy before moving on to the next stage. A similar approach is being applied to the establishment of accountable care organizations within clusters. Instead of simply drawing geographical lines and implementing changes abruptly, Saudi Arabia is ensuring that the necessary groundwork is in place before these models are fully launched.

In digital infrastructure, the country first laid the groundwork by building essential components: the virtual hospital, electronic backbones, and foundational systems like NPHIES for insurance and patient health records. Now that these foundational blocks are in place, the focus is shifting to data standards, information flow, and developing practical use cases. Rather than spending years discussing data standards in theory, they have moved forward with implementation and are now standardizing and refining as the systems evolve.

Looking ahead, the next one to three years will be especially exciting. With core building blocks firmly in place, Saudi Arabia is moving into the phase where these elements start to interact seamlessly. It is like watching a house being built—after a long period of laying foundations and infrastructure, you now begin to see the structure take shape. The Kingdom’s thoughtful, step-by-step approach is transforming its healthcare landscape and providing a model that many other regions may wish to follow.

Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 outlines several areas of interest including digital infrastructure, clustering, funding mechanisms, talent pipelines, and regulatory frameworks. Could you elaborate on how these efforts are being coordinated and whether they are aligned effectively?

A key element driving Saudi Arabia's healthcare transformation is the clear division between day-to-day operations and the Health Sector Transformation Program (HSTP), often referred to as the "kitchen." The idea is that normal functions continue as usual, ensuring business continuity, while the HSTP acts as a dedicated space for experimenting with reforms, testing new policies, and piloting programs. Once these initiatives prove successful, they are scaled up and integrated into the mainstream system. This approach has been applied to technology, infrastructure, and the creation of entities like the health holding company and accountable care organizations, as well as to public health functions through the PHA.

What we are now seeing is a shift toward creating and aligning the necessary enablers—regulatory frameworks, financing models, workforce strategies, and demand-capacity planning—to support a very different type of health system. This future system will not only focus on healthcare delivery but will also integrate life sciences, research, self-sufficiency ambitions, and advanced technologies. All of these changes are being tested and refined through the HSTP "kitchen," where leadership closely monitors milestones and key performance indicators, identifies barriers, and actively resolves them.

The MOH 2.0 and now planned 3.0 transition and regulatory environment changes offer a good example of this shift. Current regulations serve the needs of today's system. However, as providers gain autonomy, become quasi-private entities, and new models of care—such as virtual hospitals and advanced AI-driven solutions—emerge, the regulatory framework must evolve. The authorities understand this, and work is already underway to develop regulations that can accommodate the next generation of healthcare services.

This period of rapid development and fine-tuning requires careful coordination and a willingness to adapt. The scale at which Saudi Arabia is implementing these changes is significant. Ensuring that the right resources, pace, and frameworks are in place is both the major challenge and the central opportunity at this stage of the transformation.

With your extensive exposure to strong healthcare systems such as those in the UK and Singapore, what insights do you think Saudi Arabia could draw from these nations for the enhancement of its healthcare system?

From the UK, Saudi Arabia can learn the importance of strong foundational infrastructure and consistent frameworks. For example, the UK's National Institute for Health and Care Excellence sets clear standards for pharmaceutical and health technology assessments. It also benefits from

well-established professional bodies, such as the Royal Colleges, which oversee self-regulation for healthcare professionals. The UK has spent many years building these foundational elements, including data standards, privacy measures, and clear regulatory structures. These are not quick fixes, but they create a stable environment that supports ongoing development.

From Singapore, there is much to be said about flexibility and transparency. Singapore is willing to stop or revise initiatives that do not work, rather than forcing them to continue. This willingness to change direction when necessary, helps maintain focus on outcomes rather than processes. Singapore also emphasizes simplicity and clarity in policies and regulations. It publishes clear licensing requirements, ensures that healthcare data is publicly available and easy to understand, and uses a single source of truth for performance statistics and benchmarking. By openly sharing performance results and adjusting strategies based on evidence, Singapore ensures that its healthcare system remains both effective and adaptable.

Saudi Arabia recently announced its biotech strategy, aimed at positioning the country as a leader in innovation and biotechnology. What potential do you see in this strategy, and how could it contribute to the country’s development?

I am very passionate about the potential of Saudi Arabia’s biotech strategy. Having a strategy is an important first step, and it shows that the country is taking biotechnology seriously. However, this strategy needs to be nurtured in the right way. Concrete plans are essential, not just broad buzzwords. The same approach used in other areas of healthcare transformation—setting clear goals, establishing enabling infrastructure, and aligning supply with demand—should apply here as well.

It is important to avoid having too many scattered initiatives. For example, in clinical trials, every hospital might aim to conduct a certain number of trials or publish research, which is good for encouraging innovation. But without a clear, prioritized focus, efforts can become too fragmented. Identifying key areas of research that align with the country’s unique needs and priorities is crucial. This might mean focusing on diseases that have a high burden in Saudi Arabia, such as diabetes or obesity, or leveraging the country’s unique position as a global religious tourism hub through events like Hajj, which might bring infectious diseases into focus.

Once these focus areas are identified, building robust infrastructure—grant mechanisms, ethical and regulatory oversight, data standards, and talent development—must follow. This should ideally be done within a year if the country is truly committed. Having worked on similar initiatives

elsewhere, I know it is possible. The world is watching, and while it might have a skeptical eye, this is also an opportunity for Saudi Arabia to define its own path and not just follow Western models. The initial strategy is vital, but it is the next steps—clear direction, strong infrastructure, and a concentrated effort—that will truly establish Saudi Arabia as a biotech leader.

What are your thoughts on the Kingdom's initiative to implement a unified digital medical record system to cover the population by 2025, and what more needs to be done for it to succeed?

I believe Saudi Arabia is not far from achieving a unified digital medical record system. As I mentioned before, their approach involves building the system in layers. First, they establish the record itself. Then, they focus on improving data quality. After that, they add more information and, finally, they work on generating insights and practical use cases. In my view, they have almost completed the initial layer and are well into the second. This process is taking place in a structured manner, supported by upgrades in IT infrastructure, changes to EMR systems, and clear guidelines.

What truly excites me is what comes after a unified record exists. Many countries, such as Estonia and Singapore, are connected, but what sets them apart is how they use that connectivity. When I chaired the Northwest London Common Digital Care Record Program in the UK, it was not just about everyone having an electronic record. It was about enabling a woman, for example, who becomes pregnant in one area to seamlessly access care in a different hospital system and still maintain an integrated care pathway. That level of use case integration is what truly transforms healthcare delivery, and Saudi Arabia has the opportunity to achieve this.

This effort will also benefit the life science, pharma, and biotech industries by creating a robust environment for evidence-based decision-making. Moreover, I am personally passionate about the potential for generating medical insights tailored to Middle Eastern populations. Much of our current data and clinical research is based on Western or South Asian populations. If Saudi Arabia can use its connected digital ecosystem to develop region-specific evidence and guidelines, it would be a significant contribution to global healthcare. This is where I see the true power of digital transformation in Saudi Arabia's healthcare sector.

What role Deloitte can play in Saudi Arabia's healthcare transformation, and what aspect of this transformation excites you the most?

At Deloitte, we are working to build a practice that truly partners with our clients during this period of significant change. Traditionally, consultancies in the region have focused on project management support or setting up strategy management offices. I am taking a different approach by increasing the number of industry experts on our team—people who have had real-world experience in healthcare. I want us to move beyond pure advisory services and help our clients implement solutions effectively.

Rather than simply telling clients to move their EMR to the cloud, for example, we want to show them how such a move can enable better data analytics and unlock additional capabilities. Our goal is to bring tangible, meaningful solutions that help achieve their vision. To ensure we stay informed and relevant, I have introduced a regular “health and life science 101” session for our team, during which we discuss the latest industry developments in the region. By doing so, we strengthen our expertise and credibility as true partners to our clients.

What excites me the most is the opportunity to help shape a future-ready healthcare system. The Kingdom’s transformation is dynamic and evolving, and by working closely with our clients, we can support them in adopting innovative approaches, building robust infrastructure, and delivering better care to patients. This combination of vision, real-world experience, and hands-on implementation is where Deloitte can add significant value in Saudi Arabia’s healthcare journey.

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