Interview: Mustafa Kemal Erol – President, Society of Cardiology, Turkey



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Mustafa Kemal Erol , president of the Turkish Society of Cardiology, introduces one of the oldest and largest societies in the country divulges their best collaborations with the Ministry of Health in the country, in addition to offering a deep analysis of his assessment of the cardiology landscape, and why the country has a long way to go to tackle this chronic disease.

Could you introduce the Turkish Society of Cardiology to our international readers?

The Turkish Society of Cardiology was founded back in 1963, and at 55 years old, it stands as one of the oldest and biggest medical associations in Turkey. We currently have 2535 members who are cardiology specialists, divided into members of their relevant profession group, such as cardiology nurses and technicians, adding an additional 1000 members to the society’s community. Our main goal is the protection of the cardiovascular health of our community. There are two parts to this: the first one is the increase in the professional education of our cardiologist, and second is educating the Turkish public about the cardiovascular disease. We are doing a lot of educational activities such as seminars, courses, congresses for specialists, in addition to supporting cardiovascular researches. Furthermore, we have done a couple of nationwide epidemiologic studies, and some of them are continuing now. Moreover, we are giving scholarships to successful medical students, supporting research and education abroad too. An example of this is that we are sending between five and six researchers to either the US or Europe every year and supporting their research for a minimum of six months to a maximum 24 months.

Moreover, our administration board consists of nine people who are elected every two years. I have been working since 2004 on this board through different positions, such as board member, vice president, secretary general, president-elect and now as president. My main objective as President is to continue the society's activities by increasing them, and my priority is to increase the nationwide epidemiologic studies.

We have nine different study groups consisting of arrhythmia, coronary artery disease, heart failure, hypertension, interventional cardiology, cardiovascular imaging, lipid disorder and cardiovascular prevention, valvular heart disease, pulmonary vascular disease, cardiovascular nurse, and technicians. Also, we have some project groups for healthy hearts for women project group, geriatric project group, cardiovascular rehabilitation project group, industrial relations development project group.

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What are the main activities that the society has in place to achieve its goal?

Firstly, we have three periodical magazines. The first of them is "Anatolian Journal of Cardiology", which is an impact factor, with readership increasing year by year; its impact factor was 1,27 last year. The second one is "Archives of Turkish Society of Cardiology" which is indexed by emerging sources citation index. The third one is "Cardiovascular Nursing Magazine", an online periodical magazine for cardiovascular nurses and technicians. All three of these publications are aimed at professionals, but to fill the needs of the public we prepared a website "kalbinidinlesen.com.", which translates to "listen to your heart." People can find a lot of information about cardiovascular diseases and prevention on this website and they are able to ask questions which are answered by a professional from our board. Furthermore, we wrote a cookbook, in addition to arranging campaigns and press meetings for the education and public awareness in every opportunity. Such as world heart day, world hypertension day, heart failure awareness days.

The country evidently has a good relationship with its neighboring countries and the former Ottoman Empire. This lead our leaders of the society to create the Turkic World Cardiology Association with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. This relationship means we accept and are supporting students and assistance from these countries, meaning there are a lot of cardiologists who are educated in Turkey and take their experiences back to their home countries. We are also organizing joint meetings and congresses, where we were in Alma-Ata last month for Turkic World Cardiology and Kazak cardiology joint congress. In the next months, we will go to Azerbaijan, Bosnia, Russia, and Saudi Arabia for the joint meetings.

What is your current assessment of the cardiovascular scenario in the country?

When we look at cardiovascular risk factors in Turkey; smoking is still a big problem. Although substantial decrease has been achieved decreasing from 38 percent in 2008 to 24 percent this

year, however with successful campaigns and prohibitions, this rate is still high. Looking at other diseases, 66 percent of our population is overweight with 29 percent of those clinically obese (22.6 percent for males, 35.9 percent for females). The prevalence of hypertension weighs in at 30 percent, high cholesterol level is at 36 percent and the lack of physical activity is 32 percent in the country. As the Turkish Society of Cardiology, in order to decrease cardiovascular risk factors in our population, we are doing a lot of public campaigns and awareness activities.

The rate of heart attacks for under-50 years old is higher in our country compared to other European countries. The coronary mortality rate is also higher in our country, with around 400 000 people suffering heart attacks in each year in our country, and almost 100 000 people are dying from this. In this regard, we presented our “stent for life” project to Ministry of Health, they accepted this project and implemented this project in our country, establishing many coronary angiography laboratories (CAT labs) in different city’s hospitals in order to acute treatment of heart attacks. In this way, all patients who have heart attacks have been accepted at a catheter laboratory within the first crucial hour. This was a very good collaboration between the Turkish Society of Cardiology and the Ministry of Health, and we expect that deaths due to heart attacks will be reduced in our country.

We have a good relationship with our Ministry of Health and our collaborations have been increasing day by day. The Turkish Society of Cardiology contributes to all kind of needs of the Ministry of Health in cardiovascular fields and we also make the necessary warnings from time to time.

What do you feel are the strengths of the country’s healthcare system?

Almost everyone has health insurance in Turkey, which is the most important issue for me. This provides easy access to doctors and medicine for everyone. The prices of medicines and medical instruments are very cheap also compared to other European countries due to applied policies. In our country, according to the latter, medicine prices must be lower than the average of the two cheapest priced items in certain European countries. This rule has provided a substantial decrease in medicine prices in Turkey.

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Turkey’s population stands firm at 80 million and is the 17th largest country in the world. Life expectancy is 78 years, 75.3 for men and 80.7 years for women, with the average age being 31.8 years, so we have a relatively young population compared to other European countries. However, cardiovascular disease is first place in all deaths in our country with 40 percent, according to Turkey’s Statistical Agency data. This is followed by cancer deaths with 20 percent and thirdly is respiratory system diseases at just over ten percent.

Finally, what are your main expectations towards the private sector and the new

collaboration avenues you envision with public and private partners both in Turkey and outside the country?

The private sector, especially the pharmaceutical and healthcare sector, is our firm partner as well as all the other medical associations. Sponsorship of congresses, support for research projects, public campaigns promoting cardiovascular health and support for awareness-raising activities are our main expectations of their contribution to helping to sustain the goals of the society.

As the Turkish Society of Cardiology, we also want to take part in more international multicenter studies. We expect more meetings and activities to be done in our beautiful country in this regard.

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