Omar Hallak – Head of Cardiovascular Department, King's College Hospital Dubai [November 2019]



Compared to most other countries in the world, the UAE has a greater prevalence of cardiovascular risk factors

04.11.2019

Tags: UAE, Healthcare, Cardiovascular Disease, KOL, Research

Dr Omar Hallak, head of the cardiovascular department at King's College Hospital Dubai (KCHD) and president of the Gulf chapter of the International Society of Endovascular Specialists, discusses issues pertaining to cardiovascular disease (CVD) within the UAE, 4TS – a conference founded by Hallak to encourage the sharing of knowledge among cardiovascular physicians – and his vision of how to decrease CVD in the UAE.

Dr Hallak, as one of the top cardiologists in the UAE can you start by introducing yourself?

I am an interventional cardiologist and the head of the cardiovascular department at KCHD. KCHD opened its doors in January 2019, so we are still very much in our infancy period. I was offered the opportunity to join KCHD in establishing a cardiovascular centre of excellence and am currently tasked with building a team of cardiology and vascular experts.

We are building this team to handle all cardiovascular problems, including coronary artery disease, valvular and structural heart disease, arterial disease of the lower extremities, carotid and aorta disease and all other heart and blood vessel related problems. This will enable us to offer one-stop service for all cardiovascular issues.

According to recent studies by Abu Dhabi Services (Seha), one in three Emiratis have hypertension that leads to strokes, CVD and kidney diseases. The World Health Organization (WHO) indicates 40 percent of deaths are attributed to CVD in the UAE, what measures are being taken across the country to combat this growing problem?

Compared to most other countries in the world, the UAE has a greater prevalence of cardiovascular risk factors: One in two people has dyslipidemia, one in three has hypertension and one in five suffers from diabetes. Smoking, obesity and lack of activity are quite common in the UAE which has resulted in heart disease becoming the number one cause of death here.

Moreover, a serious area of concern is with women, as many women believe their highest mortality risk is breast cancer, but in fact, it is heart disease. To combat this growing problem, many steps have been taken, however many more are still necessary. For example, several levels of measures will need to be instituted across many areas including the governmental, health professional level, school and educator level, as well as in the media and with parents.

At the governmental level, new laws have been introduced including the prohibiting of smoking in public areas. Furthermore, they have increased taxes on soft drinks, and have been encouraging people to become more involved in sporting activities through the building of public sport facilities around the UAE. Education is also a key area the government has focused on, as they are trying to create an awareness of healthier lifestyles in both schools and workplaces.

There are three steps to reducing CVD amongst the population. Firstly, we need to increase awareness that CVD is the number one cause of death. Secondly, we need to acknowledge the possible causes of the disease. Thirdly, we must realise that there is something that can be done to combat CVD. Many preventative measures can be taken, however, the most effective is to start early. Many people do not understand that heart disease occurs early in life, and although the symptoms begin to show when people are in their 40s and 50s, it really began in their teens. Gradually, blockages build up throughout the years and eventually, these blockages become so serious that a person suffers from a heart attack. There have been many autopsy studies that have proven this fact. For example, there is a small town close to New Orleans (USA), called Bogalusa where they decided to perform autopsies on people of all ages who had died in the area. The results were astonishing, they found a significant number of teenagers already suffering from blockages in their arteries.

What was your motivation behind founding the 4TS (top to toe transcatheter solutions) conference, which is the largest interventional cardiovascular conference in the middle east?

I have a love for education and sharing knowledge. From the time I entered medical school to the time I retire as a physician, I will be a student and a teacher. Dubai is an exciting city, I found there were too many meetings occurring for all CVD subspecialties, which made things fragmented. Therefore, I decided to create a conference where all of these focus areas could come together in one place, and exchange ideas with a multidisciplinary team approach to all cardiovascular problems, from top to toe. For example, a blockage in the neck artery could be fixed by an interventional cardiologist, an interventional radiologist, a vascular surgeon, or a neuro-interventionalist.

All of these subspecialists can fix the same problem; however, they may treat the issue in a slightly different way. I thought that if we could bring these people together and brainstorm the best way to solve such a problem it could be far more beneficial. This is why in 2015, we teamed up with several cardiovascular societies, and invited more than 100 world-renowned speakers to share their knowledge and experience. In addition to this we came up with an idea called ‘heart matters’ where we set up a hall for both doctors and the public, whereby the presenting physicians could speak to both parties.

What is your assessment of the contribution the pharmaceutical industry brings to the UAE in the area of cardiology?

Pharmaceutical companies are an important part of supporting educational programs for both the public and doctors. Therefore, their support is of crucial importance to the spreading of knowledge. Otherwise, the resources would become limited as these projects and campaigns need significant financial backing.

Having completed your postgraduate training and research in the US, what is your assessment of the UAE’s academic and research capabilities in cardiology?

I have seen tremendous improvements in all aspects of the cardiovascular field in the UAE since coming back to work here over ten years ago. The standard of treating CVD, the technology available for the treating of CVD and the credentialing for medical professionals have drastically

improved. When I first arrived, many people would go outside of the UAE for treatment, as the healthcare system was not as mature. Nowadays, the situation has almost reversed, and I have seen many people traveling to the UAE for treatment.

As an expert in cardiovascular disease, what is your vision for the future?

I hope in the near future we will have much a healthier lifestyle for the people of the UAE, instead of seeing people sitting in shisha and smoking shops. I would also like to see more health awareness programs in the media and in our education system. Finally, I would like our cardiology centre of excellence to be well established and thriving.

See more interviews