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Saudi Arabia has made major progress on the road to implementing the healthcare reforms set out in its Vision 2030. Assistant Minister of Health Dr Mohammed Alabdulaali speaks to PharmaBoardroom about that progress and plans to further pursue the Kingdom's digital transformation, integrate preventive care and expand healthcare infrastructure. Additionally, he explains the role of Saudi's newly created Health Holding Company, how the Ministry of Health is aiming to establish the right balance with Public-Private Partnerships (PPP), and its collaboration with other governmental stakeholders to drive the National Biotech Strategy forward.

Since our last report on Saudi Arabia in 2021, what progress has been made towards the healthcare reforms outlined in Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 transformation plan?

Since the last report in 2021, Saudi Arabia has made significant strides towards achieving the ambitious healthcare reforms outlined in our Vision 2030 transformation plan. The progress reflects our dedicated efforts across various facets of the healthcare system, aiming to enhance the quality, efficiency, and accessibility of health services across the Kingdom.

The transformation includes a comprehensive overhaul of how care is delivered, organized, and managed. The roles of the provider, regulator, and payer are now more distinct, which has allowed for more specialized and focused operational capabilities in each area.

Central to this transformation is our activation of a series of national programmes aimed at not only expanding access but also improving the quality of healthcare through enhanced efficiency and effectiveness, such as the introduction of a new model of care and the strategic restructuring of the healthcare system through the establishment of a Health Holding Company and 20 regional health clusters.

To give you a couple of examples of the outcomes of our efforts, we have exceeded 36 million virtual appointments since the last report, we have increased our regional access to care to around 94 percent, and I am happy to share with you that our latest consensus shows that our average life expectancy has gone up to above 77 years.

And what can we expect to see in the next three years?

Over the next three years, we plan to continue our efforts in digital transformation, further integrate preventive care into our healthcare system through the activation of the model of care, and expand our healthcare infrastructure. To ensure these efforts are effective, we are focused on ensuring efficiency and maintaining quality and patient safety amidst these changes.

Furthermore, the provision of care will have transitioned fully to the Health Holding Company and activated fully through our 20 health clusters, and the Centre for National Health Insurance will be fully activated as well.

How far away are we from a truly value/outcomes-based healthcare model in Saudi Arabia?

Saudi Arabia is making determined strides towards achieving a truly value/outcomes-based healthcare model. Over the next few years, our focus will be on fully integrating digital health technologies, which play a crucial role in tracking and managing health outcomes.

We are also promoting greater involvement of the private sector and international partnerships to leverage best practices and innovations. In addition, we established a Centre for Value in Health in 2019 with a mission to enable continuous improvement of value in health and care by sharing knowledge, influencing policy, building capability and enhancing transparency.

Overall, while significant progress has been made, achieving a fully mature value/outcomes-based healthcare system is an iterative, and we remain committed to continuously improving our healthcare system to ensure it delivers the best possible outcomes for all citizens and residents of Saudi Arabia.

Can you outline the strategic importance of the new Health Holding Company and its role in reshaping healthcare delivery in Saudi Arabia?

The establishment of the Health Holding Company, which is on its way to being one of the largest organisations of its kind globally, is a cornerstone of Saudi Arabia's healthcare transformation under Vision 2030 and part of our broader objective to enhance healthcare service delivery through increased operational efficiency and governance. Overall, the strategic importance of the Health

Holding Company in reshaping healthcare delivery in Saudi Arabia lies in its ability to activate accountable care organizations, roll out the model of care, centralize governance, integrate care, foster innovation, ensure quality, and leverage public-private partnerships efficiently. This approach not only aims to improve the health outcomes of the Saudi population but also contribute to the sustainability and resilience of the healthcare system as part of the broader national development goals under Vision 2030.

How is your Ministry aiming to strike a balance between the benefits of privatization and maintaining high-quality public health services?

Balancing the benefits of privatization with the commitment to maintaining high-quality public health services is a critical focus for the Ministry of Health in Saudi Arabia as we progress with our Vision 2030 reforms. Our approach involves a strategic mix of regulatory frameworks to ensure quality standards are set and met for both private and public healthcare providers, investments in public health infrastructure, and a robust Public-Private Partnership (PPP) programme, meticulously structured to focus on our goals of accessibility, quality, and sustainability. In addition, the governance of our healthcare ecosystem and the presence of various governmental institutions such as the Saudi Central Board for Accreditation of Healthcare Institutions, the Saudi Centre for Patient Safety, and the Saudi Health Council, further emphasize the balance.

Saudi Arabia is putting a significant focus on prevention in everything from vaccines to diagnostics and population screening. What road is left to travel towards a sustainable and reactive healthcare system that catches and prevents diseases earlier?

Our journey towards enhancing preventive care involves expanding access to vaccines, improving diagnostic services, and increasing population screening programs. The model of care has prioritized six systems of care: Keep Well, Safe Birth, Planned Care, Urgent Care, Chronic Conditions and Last Phase. The Keep Well program is designed to help individuals stay well and get well again, empowering and supporting them and their communities through numerous programs. In addition, our Health in All Policies program is designed to create a healthcare environment where prevention is prioritized, which will reduce long-term healthcare costs and improve population health.

Given the substantial transformations underway in the Saudi healthcare sector, what training and education initiatives are being rolled out to ensure that the Saudi healthcare workforce is future fit?

We are investing heavily in training and developing our healthcare workforce. This includes partnerships with international universities and institutions to bring advanced healthcare training programs to Saudi Arabia, and specialized training in areas such as digital health and AI to prepare our workforce for the future. The Saudi Commission for Health Specialties provides postgraduate training programs to develop practitioner skills in various health fields. Additionally, our Health Leadership Academy provides a variety of educational programs and initiatives to progress our transformation journey.

Saudi Arabia has long been an early and enthusiastic adopter of AI and digital technology across industries, including in healthcare. What are some of the key ongoing projects in this space and how are these technologies improving patient outcomes and operational efficiency?

Our key projects include the implementation of AI in diagnostic processes, the use of big data for healthcare management, and the development of digital health applications that enhance patient outcomes. Take SEHA Virtual Hospital as an example, is now one of the world's largest virtual hospitals with a capacity to serve more than 500,000 patients annually through the deployment of the latest digital and AI technologies to serve patients across the Kingdom.

Some other examples include, Sehhaty, Raqeem, the National Health Command Centre (NHCC), and recently the launch of the National Platform for Health and Insurance Exchange Services (NPHIES) [a comprehensive health information exchange system Ed.], which has activated numerous use cases and has onboarded most of our population. These technologies not only improve patient outcomes but also enhanced operational efficiency across our healthcare system.

As outlined in the National Biotech Strategy, Saudi Arabia has bold goals of becoming a regional biopharmaceutical R&D hub by 2030 and a global hub by 2040. What role will the MoH, in collaboration with other governmental stakeholders, play in this push? And what is your approach to the international collaborations especially in clinical research that will be necessary to meet these ambitions?

As Saudi Arabia aims to position itself as a regional leader in biopharmaceutical R&D by 2030 and a global hub by 2040, the Ministry of Health (MoH) is actively collaborating with various governmental stakeholders to drive the National Biotech Strategy forward. The recently-launched strategy includes robust governance structures designed to ensure effective coordination and integration of efforts across all relevant government entities.

As such, the MoH is working in concert with entities such as the Saudi Food and Drug Authority, Weqaya, the Saudi National Institutes of Health (NIH), the Ministry of Investment, the Ministry of Industry, universities, and other ministries providing healthcare services, to create a unified approach to biotech development.

Our governance framework brings together leaders from these entities to align on strategic objectives, share resources, and avoid duplication of efforts. This collaborative approach is essential for streamlining regulatory processes, enhancing research capabilities, and creating a supportive ecosystem for innovation. International collaborations, particularly in clinical research, are a cornerstone of our strategy to achieve these ambitions. Our approach to these partnerships is multi-faceted:

1. Strategic partnerships with global institutions
2. Clinical trials and research collaborations
3. Investment in human capital
4. Creation of a conducive investment climate

To witness the magnitude and impact of the Kingdom's recent healthcare transformation and to engage with public and private entities in the sector, we invite you to attend the Global Health Exhibition in Riyadh from October 21st to 23rd, 2024.

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