



Dr. Aziz

By Hassan A. Aziz, PhD, MLS(ASCP)^{CM}

Health Care and Education in Qatar

In mid-2011, I received an invitation from the Biomedical Sciences program at Qatar University to serve as an external reviewer. Recognized as an expert in medical laboratory science education and accreditation, I was asked to critically evaluate the curriculum and provide comprehensive feedback on various aspects of the program, such as its goals, study plan, learning outcomes, sequence of the content, and assessment methods. This voluntary evaluation was part of the self-assessment conducted by the College of Arts and Sciences to enhance teaching and learning in its programs. I immediately accepted the invitation.

Qatar may be an unknown country to many Americans. However, with the release of its elegant national airline carrier, Qatar Airways, and the extreme growth, development, and



modernization of its capital, Doha, Qatar has become more than just a place of transit—it has turned itself into a modern state, a thriving economy, an exciting tourist destination, and the home of the immensely successful Al Jazeera Satellite News Network.

Before oil production began 60 years ago, Qatar's population was around 25,000. Now it is over 2.1 million and is expected to increase as the nation gears up to host the FIFA World Cup in 2022. With significant oil and gas reserves, Qatar enjoys the world's highest per capita income.

Doha is currently booming and although skyscrapers and ultra-luxury hotels are available throughout the city, it has managed to maintain an air of tradition and its subtle local



architecture pleases the eye. Qatar is still a conservative society, with Islam the dominant influence on day-to-day life. This rich cultural tradition is present in what people wear, eat, and drink. Qataris are known for their generosity and friendliness, thus making Qatar a very welcoming country.

Rumailah Hospital, Qatar's first hospital, opened its doors in 1957. With a 200-bed capacity, it provided general practice, ambulance service, and large outpatient facilities. Soon after, the hospital was unable to fulfill the area's growing medical needs. In 1979, Hamad Medical Corporation (HMC) was formed, comprising Hamad General Hospital, Rumailah Hospital, and Women's Hospital, with 621-, 200-, and 334-bed capacities, respectively. HMC, which provides state-of-the-art diagnosis and treatment,

has become Qatar's leading nonprofit healthcare provider powered through its network of Primary Healthcare Centers and highly dispersed specialized hospitals. Alongside that, Qatar's government encouraged the opening of private hospitals to offer a wide range of healthcare services to the public, thus easing the burden on HMC and the primary healthcare centers.

The healthcare sector has come a long way since then. Hospitals today are in pursuit of advanced medical equipment, highly qualified staff, and a network model of hospitals and healthcare centers situated countrywide. Qatar has invested a lot of money in its healthcare system, both government and private, doubling its expenditure over the last two years. In recent years, HMC was accredited by the Joint Commission



International and the medical laboratory at Hamad received the prestigious College of American Pathologists accreditation.

Health care in Qatar is driven by a comprehensive program of reforms known as the National Health Strategy 2011-2016. This strategy, with far-reaching and fundamental changes across Qatar's entire healthcare system, is aligned to the Qatar National Vision 2030 (QNV 2030) that will advance Qatar's goal of creating a world-class, patient-centered healthcare system. The Health Strategy is intended to propel Qatar toward the objectives contained in QNV 2030.

A Need for Educational Advancement

Along with developing and accelerating its healthcare efforts, Qatar has witnessed an educational renaissance movement in the past decade with the strategic goal of instituting national reform throughout its educational system. At the na-

tional university level, the administration has been working diligently to transform Qatar University into a leading regional institution of higher education. Major academic reforms have already been initiated in the areas of curricula, programs, and infrastructure.

It is well known that no country can compete and thrive without an educated and skilled citizenry equipped to handle increasingly complex developments, including the global economic crisis, political conflicts, and environmental threats. Indeed, the need for an education system that is efficient, effective, and responsive to a society's specific requirements seems greater now than ever before.

The Qatari education system had been, until recently, a product of its regional environment, similar in many ways to the education systems of surrounding countries. Learning was teacher- rather than student-centered, and dependent on rigid rote memorization, with little attention to the research, communication, and analytical thinking skills that are indispensable in today's labor market. By the early 1980s, the education system had become an issue of national concern and discussion. In 2001, the government launched a systemwide assessment of education. The K-12 system was not preparing students adequately for post-secondary education or for work. Problems with the

curriculum were identified, including its being outdated, rigid, and unchallenging. Also brought to light were problems within the system delivering education, including lack of vision and goals, unclear lines of authority, hierarchical structures, and poor allocation, compensation, and training of teachers. In short, a lack of educational standards was identified as a primary reason for the system's weakness.

As part of this reform, training future professionals in the field of medical science has become increasingly important to establishing a strong workforce for Qatar's prospering healthcare system. Qatar University's Biomedical Sciences program, which received accreditation from the National Accrediting Agency for Clinical Laboratory Sciences (NAACLS) in 2008, is the only program outside the United States to gain that designation. In April 2013, the program received an official notification from NAACLS that it had been approved for its maximum seven-year accreditation renewal after a thorough self-study and a site visit by the accrediting agency.

The program provides students with a high-quality academic and professional environment that allows for the development of their intellectual and manipulative competencies and attainment of professional values and characteristics. It reflects the emphasis of the College of Arts and Sciences on rigorous academic standards, creative and diverse scholarship, and appropriate and relevant service to the community, region, and profession. Upon completion of the program, graduates are eligible to take the certification examination of the Board of Certification of the American Society for Clinical Pathology.

In June 2012, a graduate program in Biomedical Sciences offering Advanced Clinical Practice and Laboratory Management concentrations was launched. It is the first of its kind in the region and is designed according to the needs and competencies of the workforce due to the fast advancement in healthcare services in Qatar.

The desire to import “best practices” was one of the main drivers in opening Qatar Education City in 1995. Education City is part of the Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development, a private, chartered, nonprofit organization in the state of Qatar. A cluster approach model with the aim of “having the best in each field” and “bringing the best expertise from around the world” was the motive behind the creation of the education city.

Education City comprises universities and several academic and training programs. Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar was established in 2001 as a partnership between the Qatar Foundation and Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. It was the first medical college in Qatar with a mission of providing excellence in education, patient care, and research. Other universities with a health-related mission are University of Calgary Qatar (UCQ) and College of North Atlantic–Qatar (CNAQ).

Opened in 2007, UCQ came to replace the Nursing Technical Secondary School and offer a bachelor’s degree as well as a diploma and a master’s degree in nursing. UCQ’s objectives were to produce nurses who are able to work in a variety of settings (i.e., hospitals, other health institutions, and homes); provide the best care using knowledge, critical thinking, and clinical skills; and promote diversity in health care by raising cultural awareness and sensitivity.

On the other hand, CNAQ, started in September 2002, offers programs that cover a wide array of fields and disciplines, including the School for Health Sciences, which provides training in emergency medical science, food safety and inspection, occupational health and safety, public health, medical radiography technology, pre-nursing, and respiratory therapy, as well as programs for dental assistants and pharmacy technicians. CNAQ’s objectives were to produce graduates who are highly competent and professional to serve the community with high-quality services; are able to have effective communication with healthcare teams; and are aware

of the significance of maintaining up-to-date knowledge in the profession.

Gaining Knowledge, Changing Communities

The facts outlined above illustrate the Qatar government’s commitment to achieving the National Health Strategy goals guided by the Supreme Council of Health. The strategy demonstrates Qatar’s drive and genuine desire for reforming the healthcare system to serve the best interest of the country.

One of the health sector’s fundamental goals is to recruit, retain, and educate a high-quality workforce both from Qatar and from outside of the country to help overcome the constraints posed by a shortage of healthcare professionals. The number of Qatari citizens working in health care is not sufficient to manage the complex systems, infrastructure, and other requirements for the rapidly growing, diversifying, and technologically sophisticated economy that is essential to achieving its vision. Qatar decided to make up for this shortage by recruiting experienced expatriate workers. Bearing in mind the necessity of attracting and retaining the right mix of skills, Qatar continues to assess the economic benefits of employing expatriates compared to the costs of serving their health, education, housing, and public service needs. To aid its transformation from an oil- and gas-based community toward a knowledge-based one, Qatar continues to encourage its citizens to pursue training and educational opportunities in the health sector.

Personal Journey

My visit to Qatar University and the Hamad Medical Corporation lasted two weeks, during which I had the chance to meet laboratory professionals, educators, and students. The structure of the non-academic part of the university was slightly different, but the accredited program at the university strived to mirror those of its counterparts in the U.S. The similarities between the Qatari and the American systems were astonishing. Laboratory professionals in Qatar share the same aspirations and goals, but struggle through similar frustrations and obstacles. The laboratory community in Qatar is committed to delivering the best care for local patients in a safe and state-of-the-art fashion. Nonetheless, like their counterparts in the U.S., they struggle to gain the well-deserved recognition from the medical and public communities.

On a personal level, my short visit to Doha turned out to be a major deciding moment for me. Upon my return to my usual life, I received an offer to join Qatar University as a director for the very same Biomedical Sciences program I had visited a few months before. The informative visit to the school and to the hospitals made it easier to make a decision to start a new journey in Qatar.

Dr. Aziz is Director of the Biomedical Sciences program and Associate Dean for Academic Affairs at the College of Arts and Sciences at Qatar University, Doha, Qatar.