

The Future of Healthcare and Health Transformation in Saudi Arabia: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

This paper assesses the challenges and opportunities arising from health transformation in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, particularly within the Saudi Vision 2030. Several challenges, coupled with few opportunities, pose threats to achieving the respective vision's stated health goals. Of particular importance are the challenges of providing global best value care and lower health literacy of the population. A significant opportunity lies in the option to leapfrog regional and global health demographics by leveraging technology and adopting value-based care. Another opportunity is through public medical education and professional citizen ownership of their own health. The paper suggests necessitating a health realization economy with health SMEs playing a pivotal role, working in true ecosystem collaboration. With the ecosystem approach, health transformation in the Kingdom ultimately emphasizes leverage over scale. (Chowdhury et al., 2021).

Keywords: Public Health, Healthcare, Health Transformation, Saudi Arabia, Sustainable Development Goals.

Introduction

Saudi Arabia is at a crossroads today in terms of its vision for the future, particularly the development of pathways for cultivating a culture of health that will cater to the healthcare needs of its current and future generations. In many ways, the development of healthy societies is closely affiliated with strong healthcare systems that are household names for their patient-centric philosophy, healing aspects, and the ability to promote health-centered education. Over the next few decades, the world is going to experience significant changes in demographics that will have far-reaching consequences, expanding the gap in health status among individuals and communities, and influencing the nature of healthcare service delivery. Shifts in the demographic, epidemiologic, and health profiles of international populations are placing significant pressure on healthcare systems across the world in terms of costs, access, and quality, perpetuating the rise of the burden of both communicable and non-communicable diseases. (Aldegether2020)

Many of the national healthcare visions and policies are shaped by these various challenges in an attempt to define the future trajectories of their healthcare systems. Currently, patients in many countries are assisted in navigating a fragmented, complex healthcare landscape that struggles with credibility and confidence in the eyes of the public and policymakers. Remodeling healthcare systems so that they are capable of meeting the needs of current and future generations in the face of these complex and uncertain global transitions has become a priority and a challenge. It is equally essential to ensure that future healthcare beneficiaries understand the principles of nutrition, physical activity, and disease prevention from the school curriculum, eventually allowing them to make appropriate choices and seek access to credible and accurate information,

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helping them to maintain and seek care throughout their lifetime with confidence. Consequently, all healthcare models have both short-term and long-term implications on the economy of nations. (Sun et al., 2021)

Current State of Healthcare in Saudi Arabia

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) is a very large and rapidly changing country. It stands at a crossroads of development, and there are fast and complex social and health changes occurring. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita in KSA is higher than in other countries on the Arabian Peninsula but lower than in the UAE or Kuwait, and health metrics are not at top performance in comparison. KSA does well for low child mortality but not as well for maternal mortality. Non-communicable diseases (NCDs), such as cardiovascular diseases, cancer, diabetes, and a range of mental health issues, are the largest cause of the life expectancy variation between rich and poor Saudis. There are low cancer survival rates for some cancers compared to other countries. In terms of key health determinants such as wealth, education, and health behaviors, there are also some issues. (Boettiger et al.2023)

There are variations in life expectancy from province to province in KSA, as well as in wealth and socio-economic status, which need to be addressed so that all can enjoy and contribute to the rapidly changing society they inhabit. An increased focus on health promotion and disease prevention can avert the extra costs of healthcare due to aging and prosperity, and provide wealthier workers who are able to build and contribute to the continued development of KSA. The healthcare system involves multiple stakeholders, and more recognition is necessary for successful partnerships between providers and patients, with active engagement in decision-making that will shape their health. Healthcare delivery that respects individuals' engagement can become higher quality and more relevant, and more efficient in serving a larger population. The robustness of the current hospital-based, specialist-led healthcare approach to the new and emerging challenges presented by the healthcare needs of KSA must be examined. The current hospital-based, specialist-led approach does show successes in some areas, and caution must be exercised not to discard the positive developments associated with a hospital-based system. However, it is clear that the current system is delivering sub-optimally for many patients and cannot provide acceptable standards of healthcare going forward. In light of these issues, KSA's Vision 2030, focusing on healthcare service, is an exciting and important opportunity for exploring innovative improvements in how healthcare should be configured. (Aziz et al., 2022)

Key Initiatives and Reforms in the Healthcare Sector

The economic transformation agenda of Saudi Arabia envisions increased participation of the private sector in hitherto government-dominated economic sectors. Along with this economic transformation, healthcare reform is crucial to protect and improve the health and well-being of Saudi citizens, especially with an ever-growing and aging population. This paper looks at various initiatives and reforms in the health sector suggested for better delivery and outcomes on the back of an increase in foreign direct investment and the migration of citizens and expatriates to medium-sized cities. Specifically, we will examine the potential for public-private partnerships to modernize the healthcare sector and simultaneously how these partnerships utilizing smart technologies could act as a tool towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Our study is both conceptual and empirical, driven by both qualitative and quantitative methods. (Alasiri & Mohammed, 2022)

Indicating the potential for public-private partnerships to modernize the healthcare system, we discuss some of the challenges and issues for their successful implementation. The use of advanced information and smart technology, in terms of e-health, telehealth, and mhealth, is also examined as it is expected to assist in developing a patient-centric healthcare sector for not only achieving universal health coverage but also the Sustainable Development Goals. In this context, demand for healthcare and related services is expected to be a mechanism through which cities might prosper in terms of attracting citizens and expatriates, promoting the use of smart technology for efficient and transparent operations. Surprisingly, with funds provided to finance partnerships, it is expected to increase the capacity of the healthcare sector to meet patient needs around the Kingdom. (Aminabee2024)

Challenges in Implementing Health Transformation

In implementing the Health Transformation Program of KSA, several challenges and opportunities for strategic partnership towards reforming healthcare correspondents arise. The most significant challenge is related to KSA's significant issues regarding the high cost of healthcare versus the quality of actually delivered healthcare services. In its fiscal policy, KSA is planning to decrease the cost of healthcare over time. The unprecedented annual budget cuts, spending reviews, and extensive reforms geared towards a more competitive, transparent, and improved business environment are vital. The critical players in the healthcare sector are considered service providers, policymakers, health managers, pharmaceuticals, and biomedical and medical device manufacturers. Evaluating healthcare service quality is important for improving patient satisfaction and loyalty. Though many healthcare providing entities and policymakers are aware that delivering service quality is an essential factor for such satisfaction, little attention has been given to the practical implications that flow from adopting and delivering healthcare. Thus, the challenge for healthcare providers is to deliver a service that aligns with the customers' expectations. Viewing these factors from a strategic management perspective, a better understanding of the strategic objectives of healthcare providers and entrepreneurs has been offered. Developing and delivering health-related services involves the existence of specific knowledge-based requirements. Achieving a match between strategic healthcare objectives and the key aspects of specific health services is seen as important and has been recognized in the wider service literature. Providing the necessary capabilities for realizing strategic healthcare objectives is critical and can be considered a strategic issue and perspective in the health sector. (Alenazi et al.2023)(Asmri et al.2020)

Technological Innovations and Their Impact on Healthcare

In Saudi Arabia, the popularity and acceptance of telemedicine services and technologies have grown for the sake of public health. Patients who found themselves in isolated locations, such as rural or remote areas, could get medical advice using telemedicine, which also elevated the general quality of care. Thanks to telemedicine, patients who suffer from rare diseases in other countries could swiftly share their health information with other physicians in Saudi Arabia. In the meantime, the teleconsultation practice allows internet users to see health professionals and form a treatment plan. It has become an integral component in patient-centric healthcare as it allows physicians to have significant patient information in advance as well as easy access to their latest diagnostic information and essential monitoring data. Such services foster patient empowerment as well as increased participation in decision-making regarding treatment choices, which subsequently improve patient satisfaction and commitment levels. (Gao et al.2022)

As an overarching approach to solving well-known health issues such as wait times and access to poor healthcare in remote communities, the telemedicine approach is cost-effective and demonstrably provides benefits such as patient education, remote monitoring of chronic diseases, and professional education. The idea was to review techniques for the efficient and effective provision of electronic health care in rural and underserved areas, and to investigate the potential role of partnerships in the project. Part of the crucial mission will be to research the Saudi Arabian telemedicine market for a grounded culture of telemedicine, provide suggestions for strategic technology choice, and present a roadmap as part of the baseline study. The work has looked at possible subscription services in their surrounding community. Additionally, affordable data plans were obviously a problem for the country. (Ezeamii et al.2024)

The offered services include accessing medical care and education, remote monitoring for chronic conditions, and administrative assistance offered via video, email, chat, and smartphone technologies. The workplace group has begun to teach healthcare professionals how to use new technologies with temporary workforce skills. They focused on three aspects, including vision, marketing, and support, just to take a trailer of new technologies to the village and rural areas to ensure the training. They also discussed post-training technical assistance procedures, both from the customer care team and from professors at a technical institute. A strategic alliance between the team and the primary care service staff was the finest method to boost the technical institute and the support network. For the mission, ICT training provides an opportunity. (Frenk et al.2022)

In Riyadh and Abu Dhabi as the main two metropolitan areas, technologically innovative healthcare services are prevalent in Saudi Arabia. With mobile health and other telecommunication technologies, e-health in Saudi Arabia is now well accepted. An organization signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Saudi E-government to develop an innovative hospital by dispersing telemedicine in the distant Al Baha area. Moreover, a technology company has inked a cooperative agreement to help build up a service enriched by its partnership. Separately, two telecommunications companies have both struck deals to bring high-speed, digital, and mobile connections to seven government entities, leveraging newly awarded frequencies and capacity boosts, in line with current trends. (Waqas et al.2021)(Alrahbi et al.2022)

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is committed to enhancing healthcare financing, improving patient access to quality healthcare services, and ultimately reaping the rewards of a healthy population through new and expanded healthcare delivery models, greenfield entities, and transformation of existing healthcare entities. Emphasis is on primary care services, long-term care, and mental health care services, with corresponding improvements in high-cost drug spending management, operational efficiencies, and resident healthcare professional appearance. The government will streamline the regulatory environment to enable private sector health system contributions, including insurance, through deregulation and an adequate enabling environment to harness the benefits of innovation. The e-healthcare and telemedicine technical advancements are prioritized and nurtured while maintaining patient safety, data privacy, confidentiality, and data interoperability. The government plays a leading stewardship and support role and cooperates fully with the health stakeholders of the public and private sectors, including the citizens of Saudi Arabia, to meet the nation's shared goal of healing.

The Kingdom's bold approach to transform and modernize diverse sectors of the economy includes the concept of a thriving healthcare system and the replacement of oil revenues as the main source of government finance with that operated by a knowledge-based market across a diverse group of major industries. The blueprint for a healthier future is clearly risk-filled and ambitious, yet presents many opportunities from which supporters and up-and-coming healthcare professionals and businesses could profit. The resolve that the government has shown, and the resiliency that the people of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have demonstrated during different types of challenges, would give a faithful and practical expectation of success for healthcare travelers. The government has released the first Governing Health System documents, supported through private dialogue, recognizing that crucial input, patience, funding, and support from many diverse partners are necessary over time to succeed with nationwide health system transformation.

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