

## **An IFC Reports Interview with**

# **Dr. Kazem Behbehani, Director General, Dasman Diabetes Institute, Kuwait**

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## **For our special report on Kuwait**



**IFC REPORTS: Kuwait aims to have one of the best healthcare systems in the region. It currently has over 90 primary healthcare centers, five major hospitals and many specialised health clinics. His Highness the Amir has a vision to reposition Kuwait as a financial and commercial hub and this is now taking shape after the first development plan since 1986 was passed last year. What role do you believe healthcare will play in the success of this development plan?**

**DR. KAZEM BEHBEHANI:** Kuwait has a population of over 3.2 million and 40% are under fifteen years of age. When we look at the way people develop, it basically could not be done without healthy people and without education. These are the two essential pillars. It is simple enough to build a beautiful hospital, as a building, but you have to be able to run it properly. It is not really about the infrastructure, but more about human resources. We have a lot to do in Kuwait but we are fortunate that education and healthcare are both free for its people. The most important part of both of these is quality and not quantity. We are striving for best practices, to educate people to prevent health problems, and to improve systems for early diagnosis and prompt treatment.

I feel a lot needs to be done to raise the standards of primary health care since the facilities are closer to people's homes. I call it 'citizen centred healthcare; this is what I promoted when I was working for the World Health Organization (WHO). I think what we are also promoting is a knowledge based society in order for people to understand how to avoid disease, understand the long-term consequences of their actions, and to lead a more healthy lifestyle.

**IFC REPORTS: The role of the Dasman Diabetes Institute is to both help prevent and manage diabetes in Kuwait. Could you tell us about the vision behind the Institute?**

**DR. KAZEM BEHBEHANI:** The Institute was built under the previous Amir of Kuwait, but officially inaugurated on the 6<sup>th</sup> June 2006 during the present Amir's tenure. Prior to this time there was a problem with healthcare here in Kuwait. The idea was to build a center for diabetes. If you look at the building, everything you need is under one roof. As far as I am aware nothing like this exists elsewhere. We have research floors, a swimming pool and keep fit lifestyle area, patient's area, day care; all under one umbrella. This is a model not only for diabetes, but also for chronic diseases. Diabetes can affect the eyes, the heart, the neck, kidneys; indeed many of the organs are affected with uncontrolled diabetes. So what we are going to do is make a healthcare model that deals with treatment as well as prevention. This will involve seeing patients, giving them a routine disease management programme, or treating them if they have complications. Complicated cases are referred to the Institute and we have many success stories such as saving lives and saving some from amputation. It is much more than just a quick visit and medication; it is a whole package and involves a lifestyle change. We are open from 8am to 9pm, five days a week and maybe on Saturdays when the demand increases. We also teach school children here at the Institute about the importance of health and are looking to actually visit schools. We will also have a call center and patient education courses for all ages, patients need more advice. Once up and running, the call center will operate as a network across other health centers. At the moment, we are working more with government institutions and hospitals such as the Ministry of Health and the Health Science Centers consisting of the faculties of medicine, dentistry and pharmacy. We do have partners from outside Kuwait and we are trying to bring the best available health knowledge from all over the world. We work with

the WHO, the Harvard group, Dundee group, Oxford and London and a number of other institutions globally. We have to look at where the knowledge lies.

**IFC REPORTS: You have recently created a new partnership with the Joslin Diabetes centre, (Harvard Group). Could you tell us what you aim to achieve through this partnership and what other partnerships you are seeking here at Dasman?**

**DR. KAZEM BEHBEHANI:** We look at the standard of care. We are also looking at the standard of care from the two sides of the Atlantic and see what fits the Kuwaiti model. We are at the beginning right now and we have to test it and see how it works. We do a lot of training for our doctors and nurses and are connecting every primary health care center together electronically, so you can go to any healthcare center and be able to see your file with all your details on record; your complications, your treatments. Patients need to learn not to keep 'shopping' around for clinics. Some diagnosis will be done here, like fundoscopy; we have a lot of this equipment in Kuwait. You need specialists but with patients' records available everywhere this is easier.

As a Gulf Corporation Council (GCC) citizen you do not need a passport to travel around the region, just a civil ID, containing a chip with personal information. If I travel to somewhere else within the region like Bahrain and Abu Dhabi and need hospitalisation my record could be available. We are looking at linking it regionally, as long as they have the international standard. We are lucky that we have a unique ID number which does not exist in many parts of the world, so it is easy to use this to create patients information electronically. Also once the information is on the electronic health record the patient can be 'seen' anywhere around the world for diagnosis through telemedicine without actually sending the patient anywhere. With increasing knowledge maybe the healthcare model will change.

**IFC REPORTS: What role do you see the Dasman Diabetes Institute playing regionally and perhaps globally?**

**DR. KAZEM BEHBEHANI:** I see more collaboration with different institutions. We are going to be recognised by other institutions and work with them. By the middle of April 2011 we will have a Genome Center up and running, to deal with the relation between genes and diseases. From there we will advise individuals on how to prevent getting certain diseases early enough. It is this issue that concerns my colleagues and me. It is the teenagers who may go on to develop Type 2 diabetes later in life and suffer from other chronic diseases. We need to reduce the suffering of patients, the amount of amputations and show the youth how to change their lifestyle for better health.

I have noticed that people are very interested to see this and patients are happy when they come here. It is doable. I don't think for many diseases we need to send patients abroad. If we can set it up within Kuwait, train our doctors and nurses, and have well managed facilities, then they will have exactly the same high quality of care as elsewhere.

We are working very closely with the Ministry of Health to make this happen. We have a lot of young scientists who are very committed and we are working with them. We have a couple of training centers here, for children and adults. We also have diagnostic equipment to provide better diagnosis, for which we are training our staff to use more efficiently.

**IFC REPORTS: You have held many important positions around the world, including Assistant Director-General of the World Health Organisation (WHO). What has led you to dedicate your life to helping others?**

**DR. KAZEM BEHBEHANI:** I believe in people, it is the people who make the country. I did a lot in Kuwait before the invasion for the younger generation in the University and for research in the country. I then went on to spend a number of years in London gaining knowledge and sharing knowledge, and then to Harvard Medical School. I had the opportunity to help developing populations around the world through my work in WHO. I then felt it was time for me to move back to Kuwait to contribute to the further development of my country using the experience I gained abroad and with what I was privileged to learn. The government has always been behind me and supported me and it is upon the request of His Highness the Amir that I returned to Kuwait.

**IFC REPORTS: What is the best way of passing on your knowledge, passion and dedication to your colleagues here?**

**DR. KAZEM BEHBEHANI:** First, we appoint people here who are really qualified. I am concentrating as much as possible on the youth. I give them opportunities and if they prove themselves, they are on their own. I don't interfere - I talk with them and have to see the commitment. Luckily, everybody is very committed. They do things that I cannot do. If you give them the opportunity they will do it. You have to give them space. They work long hours; staying beyond working hours and come in at weekends. It is for them not me. They come up with ideas that I could not think of. Diabetes is the same all over the world be it in the USA, Canada or wherever. Diseases are all the same. I think as human beings we are all the same. Forget the accents, language, color, when you take the skin off we are all the same. Why send people across the world? We are very lucky that we work together very closely. Everybody I talk to says yes. They never say no.

**IFC REPORTS: We aim to publish on Kuwait's true Independence Day, celebrating 50 years of independence. Is there a lasting statement you would like to add for our American readers?**

**DR. KAZEM BEHBEHANI:** I think this year things have started to move. I think it is a turning point for Kuwait's people. You will see when you talk to a lot of people who are now at a certain level of decision making that they all want to give. This new goal is the new Kuwait.

**IFC REPORTS: It has been an absolute pleasure, thank you very much.**