

## Re: Health Professions Education in Oman A contemporary perspective

رد: تعليم المهن الصحية في سلطنة عمان  
منظور معاصر

Sir,

I was most gratified to read the Editorial by Dr. Ritu Lakhtakia<sup>1</sup> that accompanied my own contribution to the field of health professions' education in Oman.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, I felt validated in my strong belief in the ability of the health planners of Oman to transform health professional education, following in the same tradition already demonstrated in the fundamental reforms of the past 42 years. I acknowledge the transformations already made in health professions' education and applaud those planned for the future. However, I also agree with the theme of the Editorial, which advocated the need for periodic reality checks.

Viewing the status of health professions' education in Oman within a global context, Lakhtakia<sup>1</sup> highlighted the impressive statistics concerning the improvement of physician-patient and nurse-patient ratios over the past four decades, and noted especially the rise in the representation of Omanis in the overall health workforce. Health service planners must not only be congratulated on this remarkable achievement but also commended for the current shift from an emphasis on the quantity of healthcare providers to a focus on the quality of healthcare provision. It is therefore expedient that such a dynamic shift is accompanied by a transformative learning process. As Lakhtakia<sup>1</sup> pointed out, transformational learning includes decision-making, core competencies for effective team work, and the adoption of creative educational models. These are supported by coordinated education strategies, networks, alliances, and consortia, as well as by interdependent education, and the sharing of knowledge, teaching resources and innovations.

Health professions have traditionally developed individual 'silos' of information, often with a deep distrust of each other in the name of 'professional protectionism'. However, contemporary society now has its own access to medical information, and no longer believes in the omniscience of the medical and other health professions. Therefore, physical, psychological, social, spiritual and ethical problem-solving in healthcare benefits from inter-disciplinary consultation (including the patient); thus, it would appear logical that quality healthcare is best provided through the development of inter-professional education, supported by instructional and institutional reform. Paradoxically, as the number of medical practitioners and nurses choosing to specialise rises, the need for general and comprehensive teamwork increases, so that the patient's voice does not get 'lost' within the system. Learning together, and valuing different knowledge bases, acknowledges the contributions each profession makes in meeting the overall health objectives and the needs of individual patients. It is interesting that there is little evidence of assessments being made using inter-disciplinary teamwork scenarios, which is a vital competency for all health service providers.

Lakhtakia's<sup>1</sup> pride in the reforms achieved by the College of Medicine & Health Sciences, Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) is commendable. I look forward to feeling a similar pride in the reform of the nursing and allied health professions' education that are governed by the Ministry of Health (MoH). I am very optimistic that these changes will happen once the current individual competition over higher education scholarships (masters and doctorates) results in advanced knowledge and skills, and the provision of academic leadership and superior clinical supervision; this transcends individualism and promotes team development to benefit all the Omani health professions and society as a whole.

As an expert in health professions' education, I have had the combined privilege and frustration of observing the achievements and the pitfalls in transforming this education in Oman. I note a genuine desire for reform by some, and mere lip-service by many. As is happening in SQU, I urge higher education healthcare institutes to embrace competency-based curricula (rather than adhering to the norm), to harness information technology and to develop simulation laboratories which can be effectively utilised to test inter-disciplinary case scenarios. Educational specialists in the MoH must 1) review the 'currently required' curriculum content against the curriculum which is 'merely desired'; 2) provide students with appropriate electives to inspire and meet their individual interests; 3) encourage life-long learning through developing and rewarding self-learning strategies; 4) increase international exchange (for both teachers and students) and further create both regional and international networks and consortia to enhance this exchange; 5) commit greater resources to education through appropriate governance, and 6) build both research capability and capacity so that non-medical health professionals can have equitable access to research funding. It is no longer individual results that should take precedence; but the MoH and its educational staff and students asking the right questions.

Of course, higher education does not stand alone. Success depends on a seamless transition from primary to tertiary delivery systems, wherein the use of the English language is key. Successful higher education results from linguistic competence for one main reason: a universal means of communication allows for scientific progress. As a native English speaker, I can only apologise that acts of history have decreed that the language of universal communication be my own. However, the past cannot be changed, and thus a concerted effort must be put into the pre-tertiary teaching of English in Oman alongside Arabic, and pride in the richness of a society that speaks at least two languages should be encouraged.

As Oman progresses further into its adulthood (having matured for over 40 years), greater responsibility is being placed upon its citizens to participate in the affairs of the Gulf region, its Arab alliances, and the world as a whole. Oman has a role in the wider global community and its people will be well-prepared to play their part if the trajectory currently seen continues. Well-educated health professionals with a positive attitude toward life-long patterns of learning, who are rewarded for their contributions and their willingness to serve all the regions of Oman (whether as practitioners, administrators or in the academic field as teachers or researchers), will enhance the growing reputation of Oman, ensure a healthy population and maintain its wealth.

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## References

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1. Lakhtakia R. Health professions education in Oman: A contemporary perspective. *Sultan Qaboos Univ Med J* 2012; 12:406–10.
2. White G. Transforming education to strengthen health systems in the Sultanate of Oman. *Sultan Qaboos Univ Med J* 2012; 12:429–34.