Advancing Family Medicine in Kuwait: A Comprehensive Review

Mohammad Alazemi

Correspondence:
MBBS MD MRCGP
Director of Public Relations and Health Media
Director of south Sulaibiya PHC
President of Kuwait association of family medicine
President of gulf association of family medicine
MSc leadership and organizational development-RCSI
Email: Mohammadalazemi2015@gmail.com

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Historical Background and Challenges

Family medicine in Kuwait has evolved over recent decades from a predominantly hospital-centered system to one increasingly recognizing the importance of primary care. Historically, the Kuwaiti healthcare system was heavily focused on specialized care in hospitals, with limited emphasis on preventive and continuous care provided by primary care centers. The shift towards valuing primary care has been driven by the need for more accessible and preventative health services as the population grows and healthcare demands increase. Challenges faced by primary care centers in Kuwait include a shortage of trained family medicine professionals, lack of unified digital system, and a healthcare infrastructure that was traditionally oriented towards specialized care rather than comprehensive primary care. The system has struggled with integrating family medicine into its core offerings due to these entrenched practices.

Kuwait's Vision 2035 "New Kuwait", launched in 2017, outlines a comprehensive national development plan that prioritizes enhancing the quality, efficiency, and accessibility of healthcare services, expanding national capacity, and addressing the growing burden of non-communicable diseases in a cost-effective manner(Alnashmi et al., 2022) .Over recent decades, family medicine in Kuwait has evolved from a predominantly hospital-centered system to one that increasingly recognizes the importance of primary care as a cornerstone of sustainable health development. Historically, the healthcare system was largely focused on specialized hospital-based services, with limited attention given to preventive and continuous care delivered through primary care centers. This gradual shift toward valuing primary care has been driven by the need for more accessible, preventive, and community-based health services amid a growing population and rising healthcare demands. However, challenges persist, including a shortage of trained family medicine professionals, the absence of a unified digital health system, and a legacy infrastructure oriented toward specialized rather than comprehensive primary care. In my view, achieving the ambitions of Vision 2035 will only be possible through strengthening the primary healthcare system, ensuring it becomes the foundation for accessible, high-quality, and cost-effective healthcare delivery across Kuwait.

Successful Efforts in Family Medicine Education and Training

The Family Medicine Residency Program (FMRP) in Kuwait was established nearly four decades ago by the Kuwait Institute for Medical Specialization (KIMS) in collaboration with the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP). Initially designed as a three-year residency program, it was later extended to four years in 2001 to meet evolving educational and clinical training standards. In 2010, the program underwent further development, extending its duration to five years to align with international benchmarks in postgraduate medical education. Notably, the program achieved MRCGP [International] accreditation in 2005, marking a significant milestone in recognizing the program's adherence to global standards of excellence in family medicine training. (Kuwait Family Medicine Residency Program – Since 1983, n.d.)

In recent years, Kuwait has made substantial progress in advancing family medicine education and training, reflecting a strong national commitment to strengthening primary healthcare through the preparation of competent and well-trained physicians. A total of 60 specialized family medicine training centers have been established, providing comprehensive environments for clinical education, mentorship, and professional development. The number of trainers has increased to 85, along with 19 program trainers (P. Trainers), which has contributed to improving the overall quality of supervision and training. Currently, there are 420 residents enrolled in accredited family medicine programs, while the total number of graduates has reached 655, signifying the program's success in expanding Kuwait's family medicine workforce.(Kuwait Family Medicine Residency Program – Since 1983, n.d.)

In alignment with national health priorities, the Ministry of Health (MOH) has issued specific directives to increase the number of trainees in all residency programs, with particular emphasis on family medicine, aiming to enroll

approximately 70 to 100 new physicians each year. The Kuwait Association of Family Medicine continues to play a vital role in promoting the integration of family medicine into medical education, strengthening residency programs, and fostering research and continuous professional development. These efforts collectively demonstrate Kuwait's strategic vision to enhance the quality, sustainability, and accessibility of primary healthcare services.

Impact Assessment of Family Medicine

The integration of family medicine has had a noticeable impact on the Kuwaiti population. The Ideal Family Medicine Clinic (IFMC) project was implemented between 2016 and 2018 at Al-Yarmouk Health Center as part of my Master's degree in Leadership from the Institute of Leadership at the Royal College of Surgeons. The initiative aimed to transform the conventional walk-in primary care system into an appointment-based model, enhancing efficiency and quality of care. The project achieved remarkable outcomes, including a reduction in average waiting time from 19.03 to 9.8 minutes, an increase in consultation time from 3.35 to 14.27 minutes, and an improvement in electronic medical record completion rates from 9.6% to 76.7%. These operational improvements resulted in high satisfaction levels among both patients (95%) and healthcare staff (95.24%), confirming that sustainable quality improvement in primary care requires effective leadership, structured processes, and active team engagement.

Following the successful implementation at Al-Yarmouk Health Center, the IFMC model has continued to operate under the same system and has been replicated in several other primary healthcare centers across Kuwait. However, the initiative has not yet been fully scaled to all centers nationwide. The project's findings and outcomes were presented to the Ministers of Health and senior primary healthcare leaders for further evaluation and consideration as a potential framework for national primary care reform. The sustained success of the IFMC underscores its potential as a scalable, evidence-based model for improving patient-centered care and operational efficiency in Kuwait's healthcare system.

Barriers to Family Medicine Training and Evidence-Based Solutions

Despite the significant progress achieved in recent years, several barriers continue to impede the growth and advancement of family medicine training in Kuwait. One of the major challenges is the absence of fellowship programs in the country and the limited culture of encouragement for pursuing fellowships abroad, coupled with the lack of linkage between career promotion and the attainment of advanced qualifications. Moreover, there is a limited emphasis on scientific research, which is neither integrated into the promotion system nor established as a mandatory requirement for board certification. Additionally, graduates of the parallel diploma program, who represent the majority of primary healthcare providers in Kuwait, do not receive recognition or incentives comparable to other medical professionals, which may affect motivation and career satisfaction. Compounding these challenges, continuity of care remains weak, as patients rarely maintain long-term relationships with a single family physician, reflecting a public perception that primary care providers have limited expertise—particularly in managing chronic conditions such as diabetes and cardiovascular diseases(Mossialos et al., 2018).

Another significant challenge facing the advancement of family medicine education in Kuwait is the absence of a dedicated Department of Primary Care or Family Medicine at Kuwait University. Currently, primary care training and teaching fall under the umbrella of another academic department, which limits the visibility, autonomy, and strategic development of the discipline within the undergraduate medical curriculum. This structural gap has been recognized as a major obstacle to strengthening academic leadership, research capacity, and curriculum integration in primary care. Efforts are currently underway in collaboration with key stakeholders and academic leaders to establish an independent department for primary healthcare and family medicine, which would serve as a foundational step toward aligning medical education with the evolving needs of Kuwait's healthcare system.

Another critical barrier lies in the financial disparities between family physicians and hospital-based specialists. The lower salary structure and limited allowances for family doctors may discourage new graduates from entering family medicine residency programs. Furthermore, there is a lack of technology integration in training and education, particularly in the use of digital platforms for remote learning, virtual clinical supervision, and e-training modules. Addressing these challenges requires policy reform, structured incentives, and the adoption of innovative educational technologies to enhance accessibility, motivation, and professional development in family medicine. Implementing these evidence-based strategies would not only strengthen training capacity but also promote the long-term sustainability and appeal of family medicine as a vital discipline within Kuwait's healthcare system.

Creative Partnership approaches

Strengthening family medicine training in Kuwait can be significantly enhanced through innovative and collaborative international partnerships. Establishing formal cooperation with family medicine board and fellowship programs in other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries or other Arab countries, as well as exploring partnerships with recognized international institutions such as the American, Canadian, and Australian family medicine boards, would provide valuable opportunities for knowledge exchange, curriculum development, and faculty capacity building. Such collaborations could also facilitate joint training initiatives, shared accreditation standards, and exposure to global best practices in primary healthcare delivery and education.

In addition to international partnerships, engaging with non-governmental and non profit organizations—including the Kuwait Medical Association, the Kuwait Association of Family Medicine, the Gulf association of Family Medicine, and the World Organization of Family Doctors (WONCA)—can further strengthen national training frameworks. The experience of the Gulf association of Family Medicine serves as an exemplary model, demonstrating how regional collaboration through knowledge exchange, scientific conferences, research support, and policy harmonization can drive meaningful progress. Moreover, integrating representatives from those non profit associations into scientific councils and board committees could enhance stakeholder engagement, ensure alignment with community needs, and foster a more holistic and sustainable approach to developing family medicine training programs in Kuwait.

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