

Family Medicine in Oman

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The effectiveness of any healthcare system is deeply rooted in the strength of its primary health care (PHC) system. PHC serves as the first point of contact for patients, offering a comprehensive range of services that include preventive care, treatment for common conditions, and coordination with specialized services when needed. The core attributes of PHC -community proximity, accessibility, comprehensiveness, and continuity of care (1) are crucial for efficiently meeting diverse healthcare needs.

Family Medicine has emerged as a cornerstone of PHC, with family physicians playing a pivotal role in delivering these essential services. Numerous studies have demonstrated the advantages of a robust PHC system; countries with strong PHC infrastructures typically enjoy healthier populations, lower mortality rates, and reduced healthcare costs (2-6). For instance, an increase in the number of primary care physicians has been linked to lower overall mortality and fewer deaths from major diseases such as heart disease and cancer (2-6).

In Oman, a comprehensive network of PHC centers has been established nationwide, initially focusing on urgent health concerns like infectious diseases, childhood immunization, and maternal care. While most centers were designed as outpatient facilities, some in remote areas were equipped to function as small hospitals, with a few beds and facilities for labour and delivery. By 2016, the total number of PHC centers had grown to 206, and the number of general practitioners per 10,000 population had surged from 0.2 in 1970 to 10.8 in 2016 (7).

To underscore Oman's commitment to PHC, the Department of Family Medicine and Community Health (later renamed Family Medicine and Public Health) was established in 1987 as one of the first five clinical departments at Sultan Qaboos University's College of Medicine and Health Sciences (8). This department has played a significant role in the education and training of

medical students and laid the foundation for the Family Medicine residency program. The first cohort of locally trained family physicians graduated in 1998, and by 2001, the program had earned recognition from the Royal College of General Practitioners (UK), making Oman the first country to offer the MRCGP (INT) Examination (8).

Oman gained international recognition for its exceptional achievements in healthcare. In the World Health Report titled "Health Systems: Improving Performance," released in 2000, the World Health Organization (WHO) ranked Oman's healthcare system eighth out of 191 member countries (9). This ranking was based on various criteria, including overall health system performance, responsiveness, and the equitable distribution of health across the population. Additionally, UNICEF commended Oman for its outstanding success in childhood immunization, particularly noting the high coverage rates and the effectiveness of its national immunization program (10).

Despite these successes, challenges remain, such as the need for increased resources, clearer definitions of catchment areas for PHC centers, and better integration of technology to enhance care coordination and patient management. To further strengthen PHC in Oman, it is essential to increase the number of qualified family physicians, broaden the scope of services offered, and incorporate advanced digital tools. Additionally, addressing the rising prevalence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) through effective screening and prevention programs is crucial. Promoting a team-based approach and improving the training and retention of family physicians will also lead to better patient outcomes.

In summary, PHC is the cornerstone of Oman's healthcare system. By addressing the current challenges and reinforcing its foundations, Oman can ensure improved care quality and better health outcomes for its population.

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