

Saudi medical students goodwill ambassadors in the US

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When Hurricane Sandy approached the eastern shores of the United States, many people in Saudi Arabia, including myself, were concerned about the outcome of the damage to the infrastructure and the injuries it can cause. Also, there are many of our loved ones who are attending schools in the US and many friends we have in America.

My oldest son, Mohammed, is one of the people who live in the Washington D.C. area. He is an emergency room doctor at King Fahad Specialist Hospital in Dammam and he is doing his residency program at George Washington Hospital on a scholarship initiated by Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Abdullah. My wife, Aljawharah, and I were in constant contact with our son before the approach of the hurricane, but when it got closer he told us not to worry if he didn't answer the phone because he will not be able to take any calls when he is at the hospital.

No one was sure of the outcome of the hurricane. Even though we were worried about our son, my family felt proud to see him become part of a team doing a human service for people ten thousand kilo meters from our home.

But it turned out that there were another 3,000 Saudi families who have sons and daughters currently getting the best medical education in the best American medical centers. They were at stand-by with many doctors from the United States to help anyone in need during the time of the hurricane. What was more beautiful was seeing King Abdullah and Crown Prince, Salman in constant contact with Adel Al-Jubeir, the Saudi ambassador in Washington D.C., the Saudi Consulate in New York and the Saudi Cultural Mission in Fairfax, VA. asking about the well-being of the people living on the East Coast including the thousands of Saudis living there.

So, what is the story of the thousands of Saudi doctors and medical students in the United States?

A short time ago, I had the honor to meet US Saudi cultural attaché Mohammed Al-Eissa and Samar Al-Saggaf, who is in charge of the Medical and Dental Affiliation Program, Department of Medical and Health Sciences at the Saudi Cultural Mission in the United States.

After my conversation with Al-Eissa, I had a lengthy conversation with Al-Saggaf. I was amazed and impressed with the achievements she was able to accomplish for the Saudi medical graduates from Saudi Arabia and the medical students attending top American medical schools.

She told me in details about their role in opening the doors for the Saudi young men and women to advance in their careers and widen their exposure to the best medical sciences in the world.

King Abdullah tasked Dr. Khaled Al-Anqari, the minister of Higher Education, to give the Saudi doctors the chance to finish their higher education in the best medical centers in the world. The United States had the lion's share of the Saudi doctors and medical students.

Al-Eissa ordered the establishment of the Department of Medical and Health Sciences Program in 2007.

Al-Saggaf heads the department. She and other people form a team to help follow the progress of Saudi medical students. Some team members are Dr. Farid Awanes, Dr. Abdulaziz Aleisa, Dr. Hassan Elnour, Dr. Ons Alkhadra, Dr. Ahmed Alzahrani, Dr. Ann Dawood, Dr. Maha Babikir, Dr. Mohammed Alnaif, Shereen Toubaji, Jehan Khashoggi, Hannan Ahmed and Abdula Elidrissi.

This department provides opportunities using medical graduate student exchange programs and practice positions for doctors. It continuously develops the connections with the American universities and hospitals to construct joint research opportunities and build bridges between American and Saudi medical

fields.

In addition to these duties, the department supervises scholars pursuing degrees in health sciences in the fields of medical, dental, pharmacy, nursing, veterinary and other medical fields. The Saudi Cultural Mission represented by the Department of Medical and Health Science was successful in adding many affiliates. They are affiliated with more than 147 programs in 65 universities and institutes to open the doors for all Saudi students.

There are 445 Saudi students for residency and fellowship programs in the best US accredited universities, 525 students in the USMLE programs, 208 students in the health services, 355 students in pharmacy, 146 in nursing programs and 638 students in the ESL for all programs.

The department of Medical and Health Science also has many social activities.

Last year Al-Saggaf hosted Dr. Samia Al-Amoudi who is a medical activist in the Breast Health spectrum in the United States and the Middle East. And many visits were exchanged between the department and Saudi Aramco and John Hopkins University. In 2011, the Department of Medical and Health Science was represented at the annual Association of American Medical Conference held in Denver, Colorado.

Al-Saggaf and Dr. Tareq Al-Salamah, a sponsored doctor from the University of Miami, gave a reflection of the growth of acceptance and the development of Saudi medical students in the United States.

The Department of Medical and Health Science helps the Saudi students who are majored in many programs and the department signed many agreements and memorandums of understanding to help accept various Saudi candidates for residency and fellowship programs. To name few of the universities, we have George Washington University, University of Chicago, Tufts Medical, Duke University, John Hopkins University, University of Maryland, Harvard University and many others.

The King Abdullah Scholarship program is the most advanced form of pushing the education to new levels. The number of medical doctors and medical students on the scholarship are only a fraction of this program. There are about 100,000 young men and women who enjoy the benefit of this program.

The scholarship provides the Saudi students with fully paid tuition, monthly salary, full medical coverage, free annual round-trip ticket to the Kingdom and even baby-sitting expenses if the student on scholarship has children. If the student is a young lady and she has a family member accompanying her, then her member of the family gets the same benefits.

Since the start of the scholarship program, Saudi medical students were exposed to the best medical research centers in the world. And some of the Saudi students with their classmates were able to make many researches and discoveries in the medical fields. Some of our young men and women were awarded many citations for their achievements in the medical fields. Today, Saudi Arabia has one of the best medical services in the area and Saudi hospitals have the state-of-the-arts and the most advanced medical equipments. The Saudi medical students and the Saudi physicians who are advancing in their studies in the US will be great assets for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

These doctors and medical students from Saudi Arabia who are attending the best American medical centers became instant good will ambassadors between Saudi Arabia and the United States and when I hear about the Saudi participation during hurricane Sandy or during any time the duty is calling them, it make me proud, not just as a father of a young Saudi ER doctors in Washington D.C., but knowing that the king and the crown prince are following their achievements and their contributions thousands of miles away.

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