

Health Care in Saudi Arabia: A Sector in Transformation

Rahaf Mamdouh Alhawsawi¹, Afnan Adnan Mahrous², Lamyaa Tariq Almohawis³, Deema A. Alshehri⁴, Wadia Mohamed Mathkur⁵, Abdulaziz Abdullah Hamad Hakami⁶, Sultan Abdulhafedh abu aouf⁷, Yousef Hamdi Aljabri⁸, Ahmed Ibrahim Abinfaiea⁹, Abdullah Hamad Ayed Al-sahli¹⁰, Fahad Hamad Ayed Alsahli¹¹, Ghadah Falah Alharbi¹², Majed Ahmed Alyahya¹³, Mohammed Hudhaiban Al-Mutairi¹⁴, Abdullah Musaed Zaud Almutairi¹⁵, Aiman Aloud Alrashidi¹⁶

¹National guard Hospital Affairs

²National Guard Hospital Affairs

³Riyadh Cluster1

⁴National Guard Hospital Affairs

⁵Jeddah Second Health Cluster

⁶Madinah Health Cluster

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⁹Madinah Health Cluster

¹⁰Madinah Health Cluster

¹¹Madinah Health Cluster

¹²Ministry of Health Qassim Branch

¹³Riyadh Third Health Cluster

¹⁴Al-Bukayriyah General Hospital

¹⁵Health informatics technician, Al Badaya General Hospital

¹⁶Al-Qassim Health Cluster, Nursing

Abstract

Saudi Arabia's health care system has undergone dramatic evolution over recent decades, driven by the government's devotion to community health and ambitious national development goals. The Kingdom's journey began in the mid-20th century, when health services were limited and concentrated primarily in major cities. Rapid population growth, urbanization, and rising expectations for quality of life fueled the need for a more organized and equitable system. Today, the health sector is a testament to decades of investment and reform. At its core, the system provides universal health coverage to Saudi citizens and residents, with the government offering free basic health care through extensive public networks while gradually expanding private sector participation. The rapid modernization of the sector reflects Saudi Arabia's aspiration to become a regional leader in health outcomes and medical innovation.

The Ministry of Health (MOH) remains the foundation of the system. It manages preventive, curative, and rehabilitative services across a vast network of primary health centers and specialized hospitals, using a referral system that connects local clinics to advanced care facilities.

Under Vision 2030, health care has become a strategic sector for economic and social advancement. The government is investing heavily—an estimated \$65+ billion—to modernize infrastructure, expand digital services like telemedicine, and reform financing and delivery systems through hospital clusters and private partnerships. Vision 2030 also aims to foster a vibrant research ecosystem and attract international medical partnerships. New policies have encouraged innovation in biotechnology, pharmaceuticals, and health education, positioning Saudi Arabia as a hub for clinical trials and medical research in the Middle East. These reforms are designed not only to improve patient care, but also to create high-value jobs and stimulate economic diversification beyond oil.

Introduction

Transforming Health Services and Strategy

Saudi Arabia's "Model of Care" focuses on a comprehensive approach to health that integrates physical, mental, and social well-being into the wider texture of everyday life. It aims to make health services preventive and community-centered, rather than reactive to disease.

There is also a rising importance of digital innovation. The Kingdom has launched large-scale digital health programs, such as the "Seha" and "Mawid" platforms, which enable remote consultations, appointment scheduling, and electronic health records. These initiatives improve patient monitoring and disease management, including specialized electronic platforms for long-term conditions such as diabetes. Artificial intelligence is increasingly used to predict outbreaks, optimize resource allocation, and personalize treatment plans. Such digital advancements have proven particularly valuable during the COVID-19 pandemic, supporting both prevention and continuity of care. As the sector continues to digitalize, Saudi Arabia is positioning itself as a regional leader in health technology adoption.

The Health Workforce:

People Powering the System

A health system is only as strong as the people who operate it. Saudi Arabia's health care workforce includes doctors, nurses, pharmacists, technicians, paramedics, administrators, public health experts, and support staff—many of whom are key to offering sustained care across the country. In recent years, the Ministry of Health has prioritized ongoing education, leadership development, and international collaboration to boost workforce skills. Exchange programs and partnerships with global medical institutions help Saudi professionals stay abreast of the latest medical advances and best practices, fostering a culture of continuous improvement.

Workforce Composition and Localization Efforts

- Saudi Arabia employs tens of thousands of health professionals nationwide. For example, there are over 98,000 physicians and nearly 186,000 nurses, with Saudi nationals making up significant portions of each group. healthcaremea.com
- Historically, the sector relied heavily on expatriate talent, especially in nursing. This represents both global workforce shortages and local workforce development challenges. PMC
- As part of Vision 2030, Saudi authorities have introduced Saudization policies that set targets for local participation in key health professions. These include minimum national workforce ratios in specialized areas like radiology, clinical nutrition, and medical laboratories. saudihealthcareconsulting.com

In spite of these gains, difficulties remain: Saudization rates vary by profession, and there is still a gap in nationally trained specialists, particularly outside major cities. Addressing these disparities is essential to ensuring equitable access to high-quality care across all regions. The government continues to incentivize training in underrepresented specialties and rural practice, but long-term success will depend on sustained investment in education, infrastructure, and working conditions in remote areas.

Training, Career Paths, and Roles

The health care sector offers a broad range of educational and career pathways—from medical training and nursing schools to advanced specialties and health administration. Universities across the Kingdom are establishing new faculties of medicine, nursing, and allied health sciences, with curricula designed to meet both local needs and global standards. Training programs are increasingly aligned with international standards, and professional accreditation bodies ensure quality and security throughout institutions. Continuous professional development, simulation centers, and access to international conferences have become integral components of Saudi health education. These efforts aim to nurture the next generation of leaders, researchers, and innovators in the health sector.

In the workplace, roles are evolving as well. Nurses are increasingly empowered to perform duties traditionally performed by physicians, and flexible work models such as part-time clinical work or telehealth sessions are becoming more common. الموارد البشرية والتنمية

Health Care and Saudi Society: Health Coverage and Population Access

Infrastructure development is central to improving population health. Over the past decade, Saudi Arabia has expanded its network of hospitals, clinics, and specialized centers, ensuring that even remote

communities have access to essential health services. Investments in emergency care, mobile clinics, and telemedicine have further bridged the gap between urban and rural populations. National immunization campaigns, school health programs, and public health awareness initiatives illustrate the country's commitment to holistic, population-wide health.

Saudi Arabia's health care system is one of the region's most comprehensive. According to official statistics:

- 100% of Saudi citizens and nearly 96% of all residents have coverage for basic health expenses. الهيئة العامة للإحصاء
- A large majority of workers—about 95%—have basic health service coverage provided through their employers or state programs. Sahn

These numbers demonstrate broad access and Japan-level devotion to prevention, early diagnosis, and consistent treatment, which are vital to healthy populations and stable labor markets.

Social Determinants and Public Health Challenges

Saudi Arabia, like many nations, is facing a shift in disease patterns—from communicable diseases to lifestyle and chronic conditions such as diabetes and obesity. This trend places new demands regarding preventive care and long-term health planning. In response, the Ministry of Health has launched targeted screening programs, nutrition and exercise campaigns, and partnerships with schools and workplaces to promote healthy living. The growing burden of chronic disease also underscores the need for integrated care models, where primary, secondary, and tertiary services collaborate to deliver seamless, patient-centered care over the lifespan.

Primary health care—notably in sectors such as chronic disease management, maternal and child health, and preventive education—plays a key role in tackling social determinants of health. emro.who.int

Cultural and Gender Dimensions

The health professional workforce is also a microcosm of wider social change:

- Efforts to increase women's participation in the workforce have extended to health care, where women now represent a growing share of professionals and leadership roles. الموارد البشرية والتنمية
- The presence of diverse talent—Saudi and expatriate, male and female—represents the Kingdom's changing workforce landscape and indicates evolving social conventions around education, professional mobility, and gender roles. Women are assuming more prominent roles not just as caregivers, but as physicians, surgeons, hospital administrators, and policy leaders. This cultural shift is supported by national policies and mentorship programs that encourage women's advancement in science and medicine, helping to create a more inclusive and dynamic health sector.

Conclusion: Health Care as a Social Pillar

Health care in Saudi Arabia is more than a technical system—it is a social institution that reflects national priorities, community principles, and economic aspirations.

From inclusive coverage and modernization efforts to workforce development and community integration, the sector is undergoing a transformation aligned with Vision 2030's goals of well-being, sustainability, and inclusive growth. Sustained funding for people, infrastructure, and innovation places health care at the heart of Saudi social progress—guaranteeing that health care serves not only as a right but also as a key element of collective prosperity.

Outlook: Opportunities and Challenges Ahead

Looking forward, Saudi Arabia faces both opportunities and challenges. Continued digital transformation, international research partnerships, and investment in biomedical innovation could position the Kingdom as a global health leader. At the same time, rising costs, an aging population, and persistent health disparities will require adaptive policies, robust data systems, and agile leadership. By maintaining its commitment to people-centered care, evidence-based policymaking, and inclusive growth, Saudi Arabia's health sector can serve as a model for the region and beyond.

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