

The Healthcare Sector in Lebanon During the Crisis: An Unwavering Trust



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Lebanon has faced multiple crises since 2019; starting with an unprecedented economic crisis that severely strained hospital finances. This was followed by the October 17th revolution and the subsequent paralysis of the country. Despite the turmoil, hospitals continued to treat the wounded from both sides without payment or financial coverage.

Shortly after, the COVID-19 pandemic struck, catching the healthcare sector unprepared and the poor financial situation of the private sector, which was the backbone of the healthcare system. Compounding the situation, the economic crisis that led to the revolution worsened into a major financial crisis. Civilian bank accounts were frozen, making it impossible to access one's own money or import goods into Lebanon. The Central Bank implemented measures to allow limited imports of drugs and medical supplies, but the system was archaic and functioning in a hectic manner, adding inefficiencies and complications to an already corrupt system. This made accessing quality medication and supplies very difficult and creating the possibility of arbitrage for import of counterfeit drugs and

medical supplies. The whole system was transformed; importers were creating shortages in the market preferring to have the goods in their warehouses and selling those cash on delivery rather than selling stocks and putting money in the banks. We reached a period where even basic needs including anaesthesia products dialysis filters and sets, basic antibiotics and drugs as well as lab reagents and basic chronic medication were all missing.

In addition to this dramatic situation, on a nice summer Tuesday afternoon, around 6 PM, while Beirut residents were languorously moving around, a huge double detonation suddenly blew up into their lives. All those who lived the civil war were forcefully returned into their own past with its hurtful remembrances of pain, tears, anguish, and horror. In less than one minute, half of the city was destroyed with 40,000 houses partially or totally demolished. Over 7,000 wounded individuals overwhelmed the existing emergency facilities, which had limited capacity to manage a large influx of wounded patients. Emergency departments across the country were inundated. As some of the big hospitals were severely affected by the blast due to their proximity, ambulances evacuated patients to hospitals outside of Beirut. AUBMC, one of the major hospitals in Beirut, treated over 400 patients, even resorting to providing care on the sidewalks till early hours of the next morning. The devastating aftermath of it was a vision of end of world that we had to face the second day of the blast. I was coming home during the night from AUBMC and crossing on the Fouad Chehab ring and then crossing Achrafieh, not a single store or place not destroyed along the journey from Hamra to Sin el Fil. The terrible blast prompted the international community and the Lebanese diaspora to mobilize aid, including chemotherapy drugs to compensate for the chemotherapy drugs stored by the Ministry of Public Health in the karantina warehouse that was in the eye of the storm. Equipment, supplies, and drugs were coming from all-over the world to support the healthcare sector's performance.

Despite the absence of financial coverage, hospitals maintained their commitment to treat all cases without expected financial compensation. The explosion on August 4th transformed Lebanon, leaving people emotionally shattered. There was not a single home or family that was not impacted in a way or another by this unhuman crime. Before the 4th of August, Lebanese were willing to endure the shattering of their dreams following the revolution, the financial hardships they faced in their daily lives, and the confinement caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, they were determined not to return to the state of horror, fear, and despair they had endured between 1975 and 1990. This catastrophe triggered a wave of emigration, severely impacting the healthcare sector as experienced professionals left for developed countries in Europe, the USA, Canada and the GCC. Additionally, we have observed the complete collapse of the Lebanese banking sector, where poor crisis management resulted in the loss of trust among employees and clients, effectively destroying the sector for an extended period of time.

In many countries, such an apocalyptic situation would lead to a collapse of the healthcare system. We have witnessed the collapse of healthcare systems in several countries that faced war or financial crises, such as Iraq and Syria following the war, and Greece following its financial crisis. Our approach in the healthcare sector was quite different, and we were able to keep the trust of our

patients and the quality of our services. What made this possible is the complete understanding expressed by all stakeholders, including insurance companies, drug and medical equipment suppliers, physicians, nurses, other healthcare professionals, hospitals, and patients, that times were different, that times were not time to compete or to make money but rather time to sacrifice, to help each other, and the preservation of Lebanon's vital healthcare sector.

Hospitals and insurers immediately agreed to reduce rates dramatically to ensure services remained available without jeopardizing payment. Suppliers continued importing goods, under the cover of the Central Bank subsidies, knowing well that the risk of not being timely paid by the central bank was present. Physicians and healthcare workers accepted significant income reductions while continuing to treat patients with humanity and compassion.

AUB and AUBMC demonstrated a bold vision to sustain education and healthcare. The University's Board of Trustees implemented a multimillion-dollar financial support plan over three years to assist faculty, staff, needy patients and needy students. The motto was clear, faculty and staff should have a decent life, no student leaves AUB due to financial reasons, no patient goes untreated at AUBMC due to financial constraints. And last but not least AUB remained unwavering in its commitment to uphold quality higher education and healthcare.



Against all odds, AUBMC and the healthcare sector in Lebanon maintained the trust of their patients intact. The quality of care remained excellent, and the cost of care remained affordable. Many physicians and healthcare professionals who left during the crisis are returning. The industry is witnessing interesting consolidation between hospitals, leading to increased competitiveness and improved service quality. The private sector, which has always been the backbone of the Lebanon's success story, demonstrated, once again, resilience in the healthcare sector, proving that despite the challenges, the country can reclaim its position in the industry.