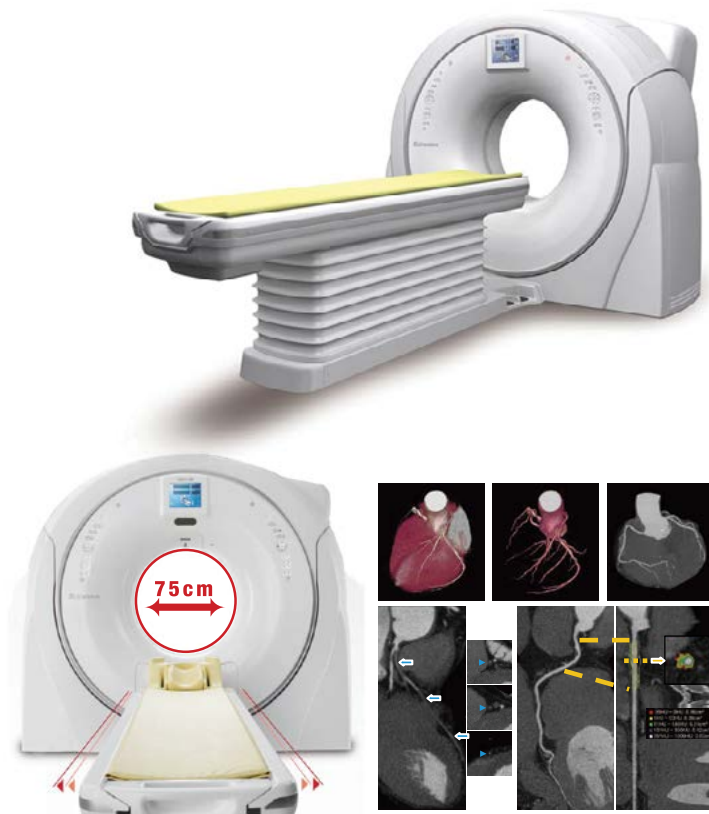


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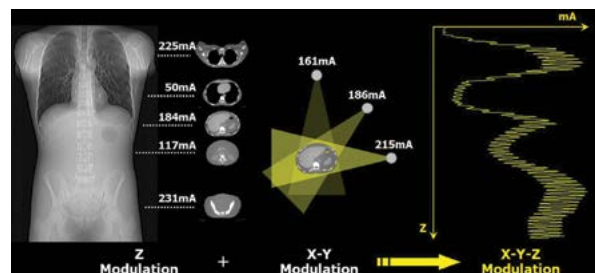
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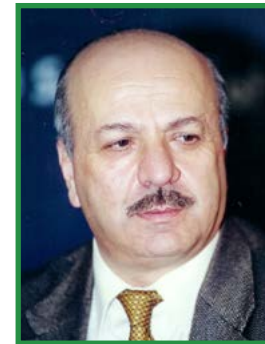
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One Healthcare System for the Korean Peninsula: Could it Come True?



Pr Abdo Jurjus
President,
Lebanese Health Society

Current Status of Healthcare in North Korea

The healthcare system in North Korea has degenerated, becoming an impotent system incapable of providing even minimal services to its citizens. The most pressing problem is that the government of North Korea has failed to address failures in its healthcare system. As part of a socialist system, the provision of resources depends solely on governmental effort, and it is impossible to innovate

within the limits of the healthcare system of North Korea. Meanwhile, the North Korean people are in very poor health with a high disease burden, and the health outcome gap between South and North Korea is large and has been increasing over time. The health and living conditions of children and women are particularly threatened, and non-communicable diseases have imposed an increasing burden on North Korea as the magnitude and severity of communicable diseases linger although the prevalence of communicable diseases has improved due to international contributions.

To help North Koreans suffering due to the collapsed healthcare system, international organizations and the South Korean government have provided ongoing support to North Korea since 1995. However, the programs that have been implemented have faced several problems, such as an inadequate long-term budget, a low level of coordination among providers, and an inability to monitor the distribution system.

Another key issue is the role of participating agencies. The South Korean government underwrites most of the budget for many of the international health programs running in North Korea; however, South Korea has had a very limited role so far and has not developed any long-term plan or roadmap. The nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that have initiated the current inter-Korean partnerships and have played a significant role in increasing trust, even in times of political and diplomatic tension, have only limited access to some areas in North Korea.

Necessity of a Long-term Roadmap for Healthcare in a Unified Korea

From the perspective of South Korea, preparing for and seeking the unification of Korean peninsula, is crucial to improve the health status of the North Korean people, which would contribute to the unification processes with



maximized human security and to integrate two healthcare systems into a harmonized one, which is needed for a more stable unification.

OVERVIEW OF THE ROADMAP
Timeframe and Goals

This road map aims to establish a stable and integrated healthcare system for the Korean Peninsula by improving health conditions and building a foundation for healthcare in North Korea through a series of effective healthcare programs (Table 1). This roadmap is based on the scenario by the Ministry of Unification on “Building an infrastructure program for North Korea” which assumes unification in 10, 20, or 30 years [10]. This roadmap specifically focuses on the scenario of unification in twenty years.

With a basic time frame ranging from the present in stages towards unification, the roadmap is composed of four successive phases. The first and second phases, each expected to last five years, focus on disease treatment and nutritional treatment, respectively. These phases would thereby safeguard the health of the most vulnerable populations in North Korea, while fulfilling the basic health needs of other groups by modernizing existing medical facilities. Based on the gains of the first two phases, the third phase, which would last for ten years, would prepare for unification of the Koreas by promoting health of all the North Korean people and improving basic infrastructural elements such as health workforce capacity and medical institutions. The fourth phase, assuming that unification will take place, provides fundamental principles and directions for establishing an integrated healthcare system across the Korean Peninsula.

Key Strategy 1: Modernization of City/County Hospitals as the Base of Healthcare Services

According to our scenario, due to the strained inter-Korean relationship, a limited range of programs would initially be carried out based on principles of selection and concentration, and gradually be expanded to comprise a nationwide omnidirectional program. All cities and counties of North Korea have at least one hospital designated to serve the local people, and therefore, modernization of these hospitals can act as the key strategy for providing health services. Then over time, the number

of modernized hospitals can be increased, and they will provide more services for more people.

Key Strategy 2: Founding a New Institution as a Control Tower

An institution provisionally named the ‘North Korea Healthcare Foundation’ must be founded to oversee the roadmap. Creating this institution would have several advantages: to maintain consistency of policy throughout the period; to maintain a steady relationship with international organizations working with North Korea; and to simplify and consolidate the collection of information about current North Korean healthcare issues. From phase 3, the institution should transition to having North Korean officials and experts as its members or staff because more a cooperative and nationwide program would be launched, and it will be better to change its name to the ‘Korea Healthcare Foundation.’

Phase 1: Set up the Base Hospitals and Treat Those in Urgent Need (5 Years)

Phase 2: Increase the Number of Base Hospitals and Add Other Specialty Services (5 Years)

Phase 3: Run the Nationwide Health Promotion Program and Build the Healthcare Infrastructure for Integration (10 Years)

Through improvement in the inter-Korean relationship and implementation of an inter-Korean agreement regarding healthcare, the third phase would provide an omnidirectional healthcare program to all citizens of North Korea as well as other basic healthcare/medical infrastructure.

Phase 4: Integration for One System

Complete integration of the healthcare system between the South and North is the goal. A national health insurance system in a specific area will be operated as a test for a smooth transition. In the beginning, the North Korean healthcare system will be preserved to some degree and South Korean professionals or hospitals might gradually start to operate in North Korea.

Korean Government

It is important to create the North Korea Healthcare Foundation as early as possible. The North Korea Healthcare Foundation will control the whole process throughout the period and will partner with international organizations and NGOs with the support of South Korea.

International Agencies
and Korean Nongovernmental Organizations

The World Health Organization (WHO) will run a hospital

modernization program as an infant and children program [9], and the North Korea Healthcare Foundation will be a partner with the WHO to maximize their experience. Dividing roles among international organizations and

Table 1. Roadmap for health-care aid to North Korea and reconstructing the health care system in a unified Korea

| Period | Phase 1 (5 y) | Phase 2 (5 y) | Phase 3 (10 y) | Phase 3 (10 y) |
|---------------------|---|---|--|--|
| Goals | Treat those in urgent need, especially children and women | Treat those with life-threatening problems, and provide basic health care services for the whole population | Provide basic health promotion services for the whole population and prepare infrastructure for health care system integration | Integrate health care system between South and North Korea |
| Affected population | 6 Million | 10 Million | 24 Million | 75 Million |
| Strategy | Choose 5 cities/counties in each province and set up health bases | Set up health bases throughout every city/county | Run nationwide health promotion programs Train health care professionals and renovate the tertiary hospitals | Start a national health care system in a specific area Then disseminate |
| Details | Modernize the function of pediatrics, obstetrics, and internal medicine in city/county hospitals | Continue phase 1 Add specialties in about 5 to 10 health bases | Education program for the workforce Screening program for those at risk of non-communicable disease Renovate the tertiary hospitals with medical schools (having more than 500 beds) | |
| Governance | Establish North Korea Healthcare Foundation, which has a technical support team | Operate North Korea Healthcare Foundation | Operate Korea Healthcare Foundation | Operate Korea Healthcare Foundation |
| Roles | South Korean government Create the institution that will have a relationship with international organizations or NGOs International organizations Hospital modernization project and infectious disease control project NGOs Hospital modernization project as a consortium | South Korean government Agreement on nationwide health care program International organizations Hospital modernization project and infectious disease control project NGOs Hospital modernization project as a consortium | South Korean government Health promotion program for North Koreans and building healthcare infrastructure NGOs Hospital modernization project and health professional training program | |

NGOs is desirable. The creation of a consortium of Korean NGOs would be advisable.

Future Perspectives

This roadmap includes step-by-step procedures needed for an integrated healthcare system between South and North Korea and detailed strategies for each phase to overcome several existing issues with humanitarian health programs in North Korea. With this long-term roadmap, we are hoping to increase the consistency of the program and setting up a clear role for each agency would minimize coordination issues. The South Korean government can perform the role of manager of the whole North Korea support program based on this roadmap.

Out of several important considerations for the roadmap, the current and future political relationship between South and North Korea is the most crucial one. The roadmap can work properly only if North Korean authorities accept the plan and cooperate, but due to the current tension in the

inter-Korean relationship, it is difficult to even initiate such a long-term project. In the context of such an unpredictable relationship, a coherent and planned program aligned with clear principles like this roadmap is needed more than ever. For the acceptance and implementation of an effective health-care program in North Korea, the government of South Korea must consistently persuade relevant stakeholders, including the government of North Korea. At the starting point, it would be desirable for international agencies to take the initiative to launch and conduct this plan like the program they are currently running for women and children in North Korea.

In this process, such a ‘planned’ roadmap is a necessity, and the proposed roadmap would allow South and North Korea to both play important roles cooperatively in controlling the entire process of implementing an effective health program and improving the healthcare status of North Korea. Through this, the two Koreas would be one step closer to unification.



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