



SEARCHING FOR CURES

The opening of the Al Jalila Foundation Research Centre coincides with the foundation's fifth anniversary. Dr Raja Easa Saleh Al Gurg explains more.



“To find tomorrow’s cures, we need effective biomedical research today,” says Dr Raja Easa Saleh Al Gurg, chairperson of the board of directors at the Al Jalila Foundation. “Developing effective biomedical research is slow, costly and a continuous process of exploration and discovery.”

Al Gurg, who is also a member of the foundation’s board of trustees, is discussing the challenges facing those who wish to transform lives through medical education and research. She should know. The Al Jalila Foundation is at the heart of the UAE’s efforts to position Dubai and the UAE at the forefront of medical innovation.

A global philanthropic organisation funded by the generosity of donors, the foundation was established by His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al

Maktoum, Vice-President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, in 2013. To date it has awarded over AED20 million to 76 research projects and supported Emirati scientists and students training with international fellowships at leading global institutions in the UK, the US and Japan.

That investment has resulted in the bringing together of 277 scientists from around the world to further boost scientific medical research in the UAE. It has also created training opportunities for more than 200 young students and post-doctoral associates and contributed to 148 publications in a number of international scientific journals.

“Scientists around the world continue to search for answers into the causes, prevention and treatment of diseases affecting mankind,” says Al Gurg. “We share

Above: HH Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum with his daughter Sheikhha Al Jalila at the Al Jalila Foundation launch on April 1, 2013.





Above: Dr Raja Easa Saleh Al Gurg, chairperson of the board of directors at the Al Jalila Foundation

Above right and right: Bringing together brilliant minds to discover solutions

“Scientists around the world continue to search for answers into the causes, prevention and treatment of diseases affecting mankind”

a vision – to see a world devoid of cancer, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, obesity or mental illness – and an obligation to safeguard the health of our children, and children’s children.

“Advances in medical research are critical to the nation’s prosperity and longevity. Our work at the Al Jalila Foundation supports the UAE Vision 2021, where research and innovation are at the core. Our hope is that it will be the catalyst for ensuring a thriving biomedical research culture.”

For Al Gurg, biomedical research brings tremendous economic benefits, creating a generation of skills and knowledge, while at the same time developing preventative, therapeutic and diagnostic innovations that improve the health and overall quality of life for those living in the UAE. “There is no better example of purposefulness within an economy than healthcare,” she says.

“Our investment in medical research reaffirms our commitment to embed research and innovation in the fabric of the nation’s long-term healthcare strategy,” she adds. “Medical research has the potential to save lives and our efforts today will pave the way for advancements in medicine, giving hope to many.



“By supporting talented scientists, the foundation is building on its mission to transform lives by paving the way and developing the next generation of innovators in health sciences.”

The foundation’s *raison d’être* is the promotion of medical education and research, which it achieves through a three-pronged approach: investment in the UAE’s medical treatment capabilities; its provision of scholarships to nurture a homegrown generation of medical professionals; and its support of ground-breaking research that addresses health challenges prevalent in the region.

It has its work cut out. Statistics relating to health in the UAE can be frightening. Data presented by the

World Health Organisation in 2013 pegged obesity levels in the UAE at double that of the world average, with 66% of men and 60% of women in the country either overweight or obese. Viktor Hediger, the Dubai director of McKinsey & Company, has previously referred to the country's obesity rate as a "national crisis" and a "ticking time bomb".

There is, subsequently, a high incidence of diabetes and cardio-vascular disease. According to the International Diabetes Federation there were more than one million cases of diabetes in the UAE in 2017.

Cardiovascular disease, diabetes and obesity constitute three of the five most pressing regional health challenges that the soon-to-be-opened Al Jalila Foundation Research Centre will focus on. Set to open this year at Dubai Healthcare City, the two other challenges are cancer and mental health.

"As His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum said, 'We are living proof that when people have the courage and commitment to transform a dream into reality, there is nothing that can stop them'," says Al Gurg.

"There is a window of opportunity for Dubai and the UAE to contribute to biomedical research in the years to come. Research has been gaining momentum, as illustrated by the UAE Vision 2021 National Agenda, which aims to increase the country's research and development expenditure to 1.5% of its GDP.

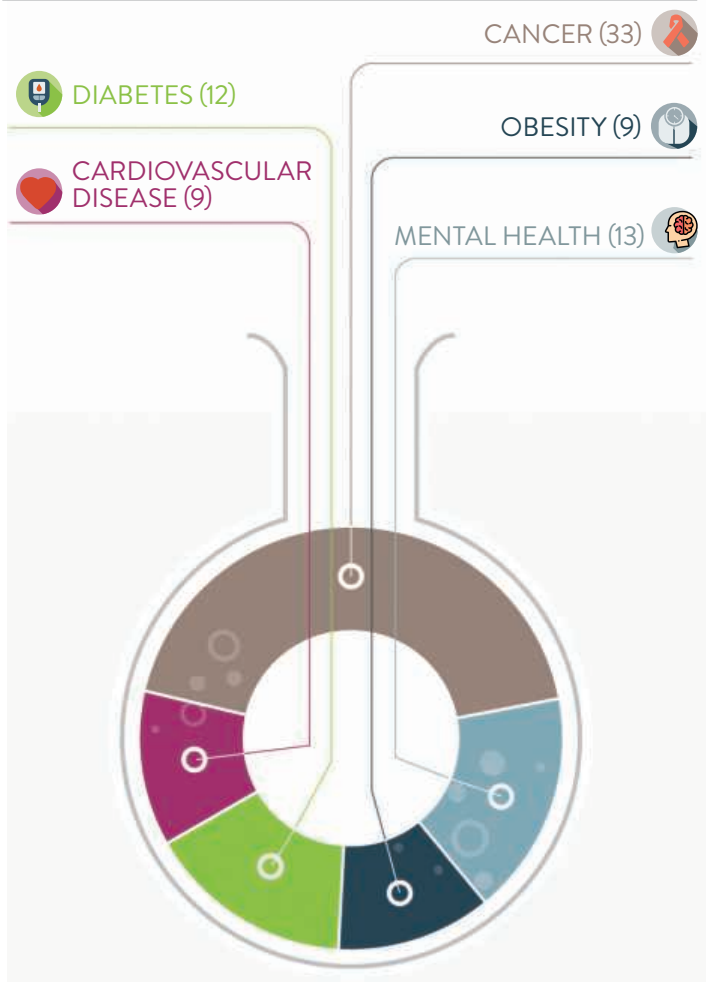
"Moreover, an increasing number of studies indicate that the medical conditions being researched in other parts of the world do not present the same results when analysed on various local populations. Pursuing research locally can create direct benefits for the local population and drive new insights for international collaborations. Research is a life-long commitment and a responsibility we take seriously."

The opening of the Al Jalila Foundation Research Centre coincides with the foundation's fifth anniversary. Importantly, it will be the UAE's first independent multi-disciplinary medical research centre, benefiting from the foundation's global outreach. It will bring together international best practice and regional expertise in a cultivating environment that has state-of-the-art facilities.

"While the medical research ecosystem is still at an infancy stage in Dubai, the desire for success and overall ambition are very strong," says Al Gurg. "With the support of our partners, we aim to position the city of Dubai and the United Arab Emirates as a platform for global medical innovation. We will work diligently to drive the national dialogue around the importance of medical research, and inspire medical breakthroughs to improve lives in the UAE and beyond."

One of 33 member organisations under the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Global Initiatives, which

AL JALILA FOUNDATION RESEARCH GRANTS



seek to improve the Arab world through humanitarian, developmental and community work, the foundation has a clear vision.

"We are just wrapping up our fifth cycle of applications for medical research seed grants and fellowships," says Al Gurg, discussing the road ahead. "Research and training play an important role in developing the UAE's medical sector and we hope to attract local talents to medical research and look forward to supporting groundbreaking research projects.

"It is our mission as we progress to bring local and international scientists together to conduct research in the UAE. Our ultimate goal is to elevate the quality and the quantity of research being conducted locally. This is very important in building a knowledge-based economy, and transforming the healthcare system to be more research oriented, and hence, improving people's lives with better treatment options."