

PRESS RELEASE

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Mena region needs more research studies to address health issues

DUBAI: The UAE and the entire Middle East and North Africa (Mena) could bring about a wealth of scientific medical and clinical studies, which for now, is insufficient to address the health needs of their population.

It is for this reason that on Sunday evening people behind the 11-year-old Clinart re-launched the first regional contract research organization (CRO) at The Address-Downtown Dubai.

Established in 2001 by entrepreneur Dr Maha Al Farhan, one of the personalities distinguished by the jury of the 2011 "Third Annual Women Leadership Forum," Clinart aims at putting all together all stakeholders in the world of research to fit Mena in the "world map" of scientific medical and clinical research works, its president and chief executive officer Dr Alaa Assem told The Gulf Today.

The ophthalmologist who has been in the pharmaceutical industry for the past two decades admitted there is a dearth of research studies in this part of the world compared to other regions such as Asian countries and Latin American states.

However, there has been a growing interest by "big institutions" like major hospitals and universities for the pursuit of these bodies of work to materialize, he claimed.

The ultimate goal is to help in the improvement of the quality of life, not only for the Arab population but for everyone.

Assem said a "research mindset" has to be "built up," leading to the development of more certified and highly-trained researchers in the next generations.

Asked to enumerate the factors which make the UAE and the Mena the goldmine for scientific medical and clinical research, arising from clinical trials, he mentioned at random the following: large multi-national population, very good research centers and expertise, the existence of information technology infrastructures, and the prevalent usage of the English language.

"We are in search of and are longing for local partnerships with educational institutions, pharmaceutical companies and of course, the local governments," Assem said.

He added that it is but logical that Clinart, which has bureaus in Lebanon and Egypt, co-ordinate and tie up with local authorities or the governments which act as regulators.

Assem mentioned guidelines which must be zealously observed and strictly adhered to since critical to scientific medical and clinical research work is the patient's safety, the hazards and ethics that need to be highly considered, and above all, the right and correct decision to be arrived at for the approval of novel treatments and new drugs.

For this, he mentioned the International Conference on Harmonisation-Good Clinical Practice, which stipulates all the duties and responsibilities of everyone undertaking scientific medical and clinical trials or research studies.

So far, the only CRO in the region has 9,000 patients to 39 study protocols and managed data from 71 processed studies.

The focus of these research projects are cardiovascular diseases, 34 per cent; endocrinology, 28 per cent; and respiratory diseases, 12 per cent.

"Certain diseases such as diabetes and its associated disorders are more prevalent here," Assem said.

"Conducting research in the region gives a company access to its market, target patient groups, and expertise in the therapeutic field which helps local researchers to better understand the disease and identify new treatments that could help improve patient outcomes," he also said.

Assem's opinion on the need for more research on the health situation of the Arab populations coincided with what European Association for the Study of Diabetes (EASD)

Executive Director Dr Vikot Jorgens told this reporter last December. He made the comment when interviewed on the sidelines of the launch of the EASD-Emirates Society of Diabetes-Lilly pharmaceutical firm collaboration on the sponsorship of the short-term post-graduate studies of diabetologists in the Gulf.

Jorgens then said the partnership could be expanded to collaborative research works, which would help further the studies of genetics.

Assem's opinion on the need for more research works was an echo of what Dubai Women's College Higher Colleges of Technology Chairperson Dr Nasser Nassiri shared with this reporter last October.

Nassiri said: "Research produces facts that help decision-makers and leaders plan for the future."