



Health care costs are escalating so rapidly that no government, irrespective of its wealth, can continue to provide free care.



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Bahrain is determined to maintain world class health services, but is also facing the reality that they cannot be forever free for everyone.

It is looking to ease the burden on the budget and the government service through partnership with the private sector, to create and maintain the best levels of care.

Compulsory health insurance for expatriates is on the way, with a similar stipulation eventually for Bahrainis, to stave off spiralling costs of providing free health care.

The Health Ministry is also looking into farming out patients to private hospitals, to ease the strain on resources.

The country's annual health budget will more than triple to around BD553 million in 16 years, making free care for all impossible, says the government.

Rapidly rising costs will push the national health bill up by 225 per cent by 2025, said Health Minister Dr Faisal Al Hamer.

The Health Ministry's current budget is BD170m a year - and it is already stretched, he told the two-day Second Bahrain World Economic Summit 2009 at the Diplomat Radisson Blu Hotel, Residence and Spa.

"We are finding it increasingly difficult to meet the costs of providing free health care to the people and have no option but to go on to compulsory health insurance to offset some of the costs," said Dr Al Hamer.

"The costs are prohibitive and we cannot continue to go on with free health care (for all). Sooner or later, we have to think of other ways and insurance is the answer."

Dr Al Hamer said the compulsory health insurance bill for expatriates was now with Parliament and expected to be approved soon.

"The second step will be insurance for Bahrainis and that is when the burden on the ministry will ease considerably," he said.

Bahrain now has 13 private hospitals and the numbers are increasing.

"People are also increasingly depending on private health care," said Dr Al Hamer.

"The health care cost is escalating so rapidly that no government, irrespective of its wealth, can continue to provide free health care.

"The Government now finances around 71pc of healthcare expenditure in Bahrain while the remaining is covered primarily by either out-of-pocket (24pc) or private insurance (5pc)."

The emphasis will be on the role of the Health Ministry in regulation and policy-making with gradual shift of provision to the private sector, he said.

"This will encourage investments in health and more partnerships with the private sector and outsourcing of some services."

Dr Al Hamer said international experiences had shown that with any reform there was a potential for risk.

"This includes an increase in the demand on health services, medical inflation, moral and ethical issues, escalation in management and administration costs and an adverse effect on the population's health," he said.

Whatever is done will be in a way that assists

A world-class

in alleviating the burden on the government without jeopardising the quality of health status of the population, said Dr Al Hamer.

One plan is to farm patients out to private hospitals, to ease the physical burden on the national health service.

The Health Ministry will initially send maternity and chronic (long-term) patients for private treatment, with the government picking up the bill.

Private hospitals had been asked to provide a list of services and facilities they can offer, accompanied by a price list, said Health Ministry Under-Secretary Dr Abdul Hai Al Awadhi.

He said the deal would initially involve maternity cases and chronic patients requiring long-term hospital care, but not emergency or critical cases.

"Patients with other problems could also be sent to the private hospitals at a later stage," said Dr Al Awadhi.

This year Bahrain joined a global initiative to ensure that people's lives are not compromised by unsafe surgical practices.

The World Health Organisation's (WHO) Safe Surgery Saves Lives initiative covers more than 250 hospitals worldwide and is expected to prevent at least 500,000 patients' lives being put on the line each year due to medical errors.

"We have started implementing the initiatives and expect to see some results in the coming months and years," said Health Ministry training and planning assistant under-secretary Dr Fawzi Amin.

"We are not saying lives are in danger here, but that key errors could be prevented if simple steps are followed."

Dr Amin was speaking at the ministry's headquarters in Juffair on the release of the final recommendations of the GCC conference on patient safety, held from April 6 to 8 at the College of Health Sciences in Salmaniya.

"We have decided to implement several key initiatives and more will follow," he said.

Health officials across the region called on Arab governments to start practical steps for the implementation of the initiative at public and private hospitals.

Dr Amin said steps were being taken to urge hospitals that have started implementing the initiative to also implement a root cause analysis programme when investigating any adverse events and focusing on system repair as a means to prevent or reduce recurrence.

"We have to reach a consensus on uniform clinical guidelines and endorse it at national level with gradual implementation, followed by



● Bahrain helping make operations safer

periodic evaluation," he said.

Human resources development has to be strengthened so that staff can gain training in safe intervention skills, said Dr Amin.

"Improving communication between members of health care team and documenting their communication during patients care is also an issue," he said.

The WHO started the initiative about two years ago and aims to have 250 hospitals on board by the end of this year and 2,500 by the end of next year.

The project focuses on four main areas for evaluation and improvement - prevention of surgical site infections, safe anaesthesia, safe surgical teams and measurement and quality assurance mechanisms.

An early detection system to combat domestic violence was launched. New guidelines are now being distributed to hospitals and health centres to help health workers identify potential abuse cases.

They also include instructions on how to treat abused women and refer their cases to the proper facility, such as a shelter or psychiatric department.

It is the first time such a system has been introduced in Bahrain, where victims are often reluctant to speak up.

Most victims of abuse don't even know where to turn for help, said Health Ministry Maternal and Child Health Services head Dr Fahima Al Mutawa.

She hoped the new detection system would