The Pioneer of Health Informatics in Saudi Arabia Moves On

By: Mowafa Househ, PhD

Prof. Dr. Majid Altuwaijri, founder and Dean of the College of Public Health and Health Informatics, King Saud Bin Abdulaziz University for Health Sciences, CIO for the National Guard Health Affairs, retired from public service last month. For the past twenty years, Professor Altuwaijri has strived to cement and lead health informatics initiatives within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In 2005, Professor Altuwaijri established the first college of Public Health and Health Informatics in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East. Today, there are over five Public Health and Health Informatics programs within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as a result of Professor Altuwaijri’s efforts. Dr. Ahmad Alamry, who recently replaced Professor Altuwaijri as Dean of the College of Public Health and Health Informatics said in a statement:

“There is never a perfect time for this type of transition, but Professor Altuwaijri will be remembered for his visionary leadership and role in establishing the first college of Public Health and Health Informatics within the Middle East. We will continue with the momentum he started by excelling in research, education and community service within the field of public health and health informatics.”

In 2006, Professor Altuwaijri also established the Saudi Arabian Health Informatics Association (SAHI) and served as president from 2006 till 2012. That same year, Professor Altuwaijri initiated the first E-health conference in Saudi Arabia with great success in bringing together academics, corporations, clinicians, and healthcare policy makers at one event. Under his leadership, SAHI grew to host more conferences, events and workshops with great success. The current President of SAHI and Chairman of Health Informatics at the College of Public Health and Health Informatics, King Saud Bin Abdulaziz University for Health Sciences, Dr. Bandar Alhaqabani in a statement said:

“So many of us who worked with Professor Altuwaijri were inspired by his visionary leadership and his ability to overcome challenges and still have a great attitude to make such meaningful contributions to the field of health informatics within Saudi Arabia.”

One of Professor Altuwaijri’s principal accomplishments, and perhaps his most lasting legacy, was the establishment of the King Abdullah Arabic Health Encyclopedia (KAAHE). He started the initiative based on a landmark study he led in 2009 which found that over 80%
of the Arabic health websites were neither credible nor trustworthy according to established health information standards. With these findings, Professor Altuwajri worked effortlessly with a dedicated team to launch the King Abdullah Arabic Health Encyclopedia in 2010. The website was officially launched in 2012 and almost one and a half years after its launch it has become the most visited Arabic health website in the Middle East with over one million visitors a month. Prof. Dr. Antoine Geissbuhler, former President of the International Medical Informatics Association and collaborator on the KAAHE project in a statement said:

“It is a privilege to collaborate with Professor Altuwajri, a visionary leader, an excellent team builder, an accomplished scientist, and a true gentleman. His ability to dream, inspire, motivate, and realize has led to many significant accomplishments, including the Encyclopedia, which, hopefully, he will continue to nurture and grow for the benefit of populations and professionals.”

For his efforts over the years in building health informatics within Saudi Arabia, Professor Altuwajri was granted the King Abdulaziz Medal of Honor in the first degree, the highest honor bestowed on a civilian in Saudi Arabia.

Professor Altuwajri has worked diligently to promote health informatics across the country. He has written many articles and delivered many presentations at various health informatics conferences around the world. He is national and internationally recognized thought expert and leader in health informatics and is respected locally by his health informatics colleagues across Saudi Arabia and the Middle East.

Professor Altuwajri’s accomplishments and role within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia go far beyond the scope of this article. What makes his career even more remarkable is his humbleness coupled with his passion and persistent efforts to achieve his goals.

In a statement Professor Altuwajri said:

“I was blessed with a good working environment that supported innovation and creative thinking. However, my true success is the fact that I was able to build a strong team who will continue the journey forward”

Professor Altuwajri will be remembered by his friends, colleagues, staff, and students for his enormous contributions and positive influence on both a personal and professional level. Dr. Fadi Albuhairan, Assistant Professor, College of Public Health and Health Informatics, King Saud Bin Abdulaziz University for Health Sciences, a protégé of Professor Altuwajri said: “I will always remember Professor Altuwajri as the pioneer of health informatics in Saudi Arabia. I was inspired by him, which lead me to pursue my doctoral studies in this area. If it was not for his support and inspiration, I would not have continued.”

Professor Altuwajri takes on a new role as a Managing Director at Accenture, leading its Middle East health operation in Riyadh.

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