

Comprehensive Hospitalization Coverage for all the Lebanese Elderly over the Age of 64

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As human beings, we have many fears that generate anxiety and panic; some of these fears fade away with time, while others control our thoughts and actions throughout a lifetime. What is fascinating is the fact that some fears are passed on from generation to generation, leaving an entire population crippled with negative perceptions. Unfortunately, for several years, one of these hereditary horrors has been dominating over the health system in Lebanon, which transformed the privilege of being part of the elderly group into a dreaded and shameful misfortune. Citizens belonging to this sector of the population are left victims of financial medical burdens prohibiting them from undergoing the appropriate treatment and from accessing the required care. As a result, a national burden is created, fostering moral concern and monetary issues.

Recent statistics conducted in 2014 revealed that 9.7% of the Lebanese population is represented by senior citizens of age 65 years and above, where 70% of the individuals belonging to this category are hospitalized at the Ministry's (MOPH) expense. These citizens covered medically by the MOPH constitute 18.5% of the patients hospitalized and treated at the expense of the Ministry and consume around 22.5% of the hospitalization budget of the Ministry.

Over the past few years, a significant improvement has been recorded at the level of the health indicators, where infant mortality (under the age of 5) decreased from 33 deaths per 1000 live births in 1995 to 9 deaths per 1000 live births in 2012 while the maternal mortality ratio witnessed a tremendous downfall reaching 16 deaths per 100,000 in 2012 (compared to 130 deaths per 100,000 in 1995). Therefore, after analyzing the remarkable changes in the above statistical figures, experts concluded that a decrease in the number of mortalities will consequently lead to a rise in the number of members belonging to the category of aged persons and thus a growth in the amount of expenses caused by health conditions, medical needs, and expensive treatments for chronic diseases which mostly affect the elderly. Furthermore, experts assert that the senior citizens will make up 17% of the population in the next 10 years.

Despite efforts invested by the Lebanese MOPH to satisfy the needs of the majority of the aged citizens, the World Health Statistics published in 2014 for the year 2011 showed that Lebanon's share of government spending on health is quite low and insufficient compared to regional countries and its position at a global level with a total spending of 31% in contrast to Jordan with a spending of 65%, France with a spending of 76.8%, Tunisia with a spending of 59.4%, and Spain with a spending of 73%. This situation can be linked to the disastrous economic and political situation Lebanon is currently facing which was also aggravated with the influx of refugees and thus an elevated health care crisis and an alarming shortage in human resources required to meet people's health needs.

Citizens invest their skills and knowledge and dedicate their time and efforts in their workplace with the aim of contributing to the prosperity of the country and building their assets for future obligations, especially those necessities relating to their health. Most of the employees enjoy financial help from the NSSF (National Social Security Fund) through the coverage of 80 to 90% of the price of drugs and hospitalizations costs. . Other individuals like the self-employed lack this benefit and resort instead to insurance companies which most of the times does not concede to cover adults or children with serious conditions requesting expensive surgeries and long term treatments. However, what should be considered an issue of concern is the situation happening after the age of 64 is reached, where people relying on the NSSF as a monetary solution for health coverage lose this benefit following retirement. As a result, insurance companies become the only salvation for all, but citizens are faced with increased costs requested to have access to medical insurance all year long. Some people abide to this unfortunate course of events and find themselves drowning in insurance fees and drug costs while others cannot afford insurance expenses, thus relying completely on services provided by the MOPH and neglecting any additional care even when urgent.

With the goal of achieving universal health coverage in Lebanon, the Ministry of Public Health decided to initiate a comprehensive (100%) hospitalization coverage for all the elderly over the age of 64 to compensate for the years of hard work and create a respectful environment with all the necessary means enabling citizens to age with dignity. The project was announced by the Minister Wael Abou Faour during the launching ceremony at the Grand Serail that took place on Tuesday July 19th, 2016 in the presence of the Prime Minister Tamem Salem, the Minister of Finance Ali Hassan Khalil, and the Director General of the MOPH Dr. Walid Ammar, as well as fellow ministers, members of the parliament, and representatives of syndicates and embassies. Throughout his speech, Minister Abou Faour categorized the elderly's needs into three groups: chronic diseases (cardiovascular diseases, lung and kidney diseases, mental illnesses, and physical and joint pain), cancer and non-treatable diseases, and the diseases of the decade such as Alzheimer's, Parkinson, and Osteoporosis, in addition to all physical therapy services, nursing care at home, psychological treatment, and any supplementary diagnostic services needed.

The Minister then asserted the continuous work being implemented to upgrade primary health care centers for people to have access through these institutions to innovative and diverse health care services mostly required by senior citizens such as checkups on the progress of chronic diseases, supply of drugs necessary for appropriate treatment, and early diagnosis of illnesses affecting aged citizens including diabetes, cancer, cholesterol, and hypertension.

Director General Dr. Walid Ammar emphasized the procedures that should be achieved for funding to be spent appropriately in the different areas of the project. These procedures include the development of the network of the primary health care centers and promotion of prevention programs; the development of a unified information base for all public health funds including NSSF ; issuing decisions to reduce drug prices; the categorization of hospitals based on characteristics of accreditation, patient satisfaction, and case-mix; and relying on assistance from private institutions for surveillance and assurance of the correct adaptation of rules concerning the admission criteria.

The ceremony was ended with an optimistic attitude towards successfully fulfilling the project through the collaboration of both public and private sectors, specifically hospitals, by accomplishing their tasks successfully.

Where do you see yourself after retirement? “I see myself receiving the needed care and enjoying the rest of my days in a respectful and dignified manner. I invested in my country, and now my country is investing in me”... Hopefully, this positive and successful vision will be spread in Lebanon following this project. Towards Better Health, Towards National Healthcare, Towards Health for All!

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