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'Health care system needs reform'

Amr Emam

THE recent shutting down of al-Demerdash Hospital, affiliated to Ain Shams University, came as no surprise to health care specialists.

They say the closure of the hospital should signal to the health authorities the need to overhaul the health care system and revolutionise hospitals.

"Most public hospitals are mismanaged, offer poor medical services and suffer shortages of specialists and equipment," Ahmed Saafan, who until recently was the assistant health minister, said. "Our health care system needs to be totally reconsidered."

More than 80 per cent of medical services here are provided by hospitals directly run by the government or by state-owned universities. But Egypt's state-run health system is blighted by mismanagement, corruption and lack of "planning, specialists say.

Egypt allocated LE46 billion (roughly \$5.7 billion) to its health sector last year.

Some LE36 billion (around \$4.5 billion) went to the salaries of administrative staff, nurses, and doctors, according to the Ministry of Health. The rest of the budget (LE10 billion) was spent on treating the public.

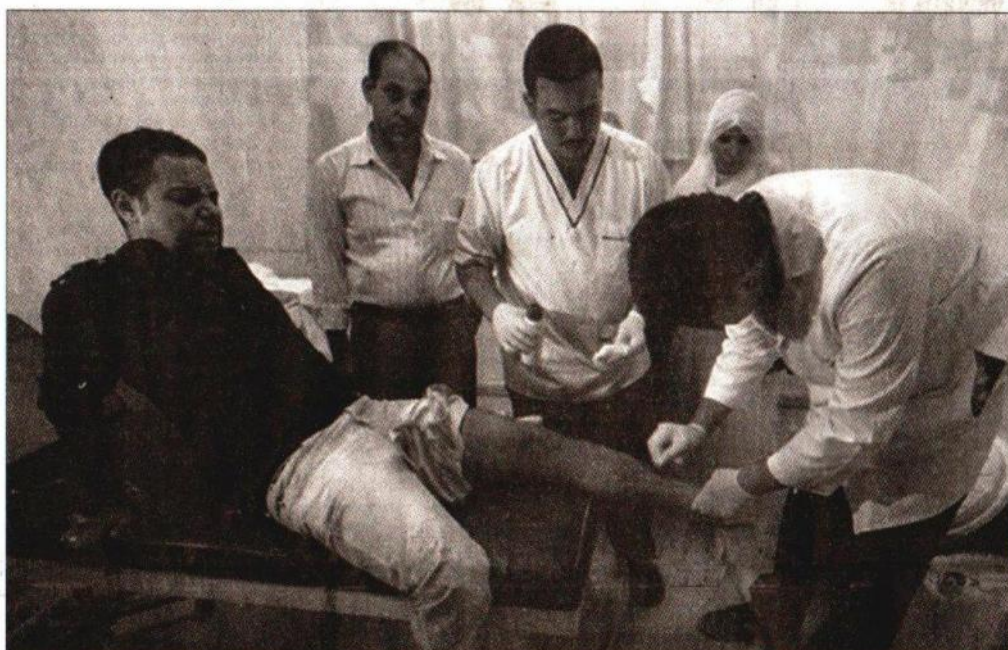
Most of the salaries, meanwhile, go to administrative workers rather than doctors or nurses.

Al-Kasr al-Aini Hospital, affiliated to Cairo University, is a case in point. Out of the hospital's monthly income of LE26 million (\$3.2 million), LE17 million (\$2.1 million) goes to the salaries of administrative staff, whereas doctors' salaries amount to LE6 million (\$750,000), the hospital director says.

The administrative workers do not get higher salaries. The fact is their number is almost ten times that of the doctors at this hospital. Most state-owned or run hospitals are the same.

Doctors working for state-run hospitals are paid almost ten times less than others working for private hospitals. This negatively affects their performance and ability to hone their professional skills.

"A doctor has to do more than one job to



DETERIORATING SYSTEM: Specialists say Egypt's health care system needs reform.

feed his family," said Khaled Samir, a member of the board of the Doctors' Syndicate, the independent guild of the nation's doctors. "There is a wrong perception in decision-making circles that spending on health is a waste of money."

But Egypt is wasting its medical human resources. Out of a total of 250,000 doctors registered at the Doctors' Syndicate, only 45,000 still work in Egypt. The rest have gone abroad.

Those remaining are left to be victimised by scarce finance and lack of further training, which translates into poor performance and fatal medical mistakes.

Samir attributes such mistakes to what he describes as "deteriorating medical education."

The Health Minister agrees. On February 7, the minister said almost all the 8,000 people who graduate from medical schools

every year are not fit for the medical profession.

But this does not explain why those fortunate enough to find work in private hospitals sometimes excel, or why Egyptian doctors who pursue careers in Europe or the in the US become successful.

Egyptians, meanwhile, must pay for their medical treatment in the absence of a universal health insurance system.

About half of total health expenditure is paid for by patients whether in public or private medical facilities, according to the World Health Organisation.

The government is now thinking of introducing a universal health insurance system that covers all citizens.

The current system covers only the nation's more than six million civil servants, leaving the rest of the population out. A new system however, would need LE90

billion (about \$11 billion) to be applied. The government says it has only LE9 billion (around \$1.1 billion) in its coffers at present.

But some people say reform can only happen when doctors – the main players of the health care system – are at the heart of the process.

Apart from being poorly-paid and deprived of professional advancement, Egypt's doctors are humiliated and sometimes beaten as they do their work.

A current tussle between the government and the Medical Association was caused by a low-ranking policeman beating a doctor at a northern Cairo hospital.

"Our health system goes from bad to worse," Saafan said. "Egypt, which used to be a Mecca for medical treatment-seekers from other Arab states, now lags behind most of those states."

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