



Dr Mohammed Al Maadheed has over 25 years' experience in the fields of Health, Sports Medicine and Humanitarian work. He is considered to be the father of Sports Medicine in Qatar where he set-up the National Anti-doping Commission in 2005 and Qatar Anti-doping Laboratory in 2012.

He attained his medical degree from the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland and a Ph.D. in Strategic Management in Healthcare from the University of Wales. He has pioneered sports medicine care in Qatar since 1991, running the medical centre of the Athletic Federation until 1999 and, under the direction of HH The Emir of Qatar Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani, expanding its care to all athletes.

HH Sheikh Jassim Bin Hamad Al Thani requested Dr Mohammed to set-up a new state of the art, purpose-built Orthopaedic and Sports Medicine Hospital for Qatari Athletes – Aspetar. Under his guidance, Dr Al Maadheed established and managed the facility as Director General from 2003 to 2012.

Aspetar attained international recognition when it was accredited as a FIFA Medical Centre of Excellence in 2009 and expanded its reach nationally into the Clubs and Federations of Qatar through the innovative National Sports Medicine Programme (NSMP). Throughout Dr Mohammed's leadership of Aspetar, the NSMP provided medical service coverage to over 90 sporting events. He was instrumental in helping secure Qatar's bids for the 2006 Asian Games and the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

Also active in the fields of health and humanitarianism, Dr Al Maadheed spent a decade as CEO of Qatar Red Crescent and is currently its President. He is a prominent figure of public health in Qatar.

He still donates much of his time to these causes; speaking internationally as well as authoring articles, his work has been widely recognised and honoured by several organisations worldwide.



QATAR

AN INTERVIEW WITH

DR MOHAMMED AL MAADHEED

FORMER DIRECTOR GENERAL OF ASPETAR

– Interview by Dr Nebojsa Popovic

Aspetar started as an idea and formally opened in 2007. You have been here from the beginning. Can you give me some background to the story of Aspetar?

Qatar's first sports medicine centre opened in late 1990 under the umbrella of the Qatar Athletic Federation. The centre provided care to the federation athletes.

HH The Emir Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani ordered that this centre will be expanded to serve all athletes in Qatar as a National Centre and I was asked to do it, I had been dreaming of setting up such a facility since 1995.

What approach did you take to setting up Aspetar?

We took a very philosophical approach, I spent a lot of time reviewing articles, talking to a lot of people and reading books to really get into the core philosophy of sports medicine. I needed to develop a mission. For any type of project you need to come with a focus. I had attended a lot of workshops and I knew how to

assist athletes in reaching their maximum potential. That was our mission. Once we had decided on the mission we started putting together an objective that we could reach by 2010.

What concepts did you need to cover?

There were a number of different concepts we had to experiment and work with. We needed to cover everything from the moment the athletes come into the hospital to when they leave. If an athlete visits Aspetar with an injury, we want them to leave with not only the injury rehabilitated, but also the ability to play to their maximum potential again. So this is what governed our philosophical sense. That is why we developed the different departments.

What was your experience of putting this philosophy into practice?

One of the questions which we faced was who should lead this? Should we lead it with sports medicine or with the orthopaedic

surgeons? We decided to keep it as a sports medicine facility with surgery as one part, rather than the leading part, because we wanted all the departments to work together as a team.

Additionally the environment had to be right. It had to be a sporting environment, but also somewhere relaxing and inviting. We have athletes who see themselves as special, so we have to make them feel special. We also wanted to provide a good environment not only for the athletes but also for the staff, because we have to attract staff from all over the world.

Did you face any other issues?

When we were setting up Aspetar, we looked at our environment and how to deal with the clubs and federations in a strategic sense. Through a contractual agreement, we established the National Sports Medicine Programme (NSMP), which really exists as a health-care system. We have a central hospital, which is Aspetar, but we still need primary care centres and clinics all over the country to send the patients in a timely manner. If there is any delay, there is a problem. We need everything to work together, the system needs to be there, the definitions need to be the same and the interaction and quality of the people has to be the same so they don't cause any further damage before the patient comes in.

A sense of mission and belief and a sense that you are doing something special is the core to any company

Aspetar has employees from over 50 different countries. How did you bring those different cultures together?

I think to attract people you have to sell a dream. If you want to succeed in anything in life – to lead people into something, to establish or even manage something – I think the key is a sense of mission. Fitting all the systems together is something that can be worked out in time. A sense of mission and belief and a sense that you are doing something special is the core to any company. We attracted people by inviting them to be part of this exciting



Image: Kofi Annan, former Secretary-General of the UN, pays a visit to Aspetar, 2011.

Image: Dr Mohammed gives Jose Mourinho a tour of Aspetar, 2011



experience in Qatar and to be part of setting up this kind of facility. People who have left Aspetar have gone on to lead other projects elsewhere because of their experience. That makes me feel good, because it shows I brought the best people in. The Aspetar experience is a great experience for them and people outside recognise that.

What was your experience leading these people from different countries?

Obviously we had challenges with people from different countries and cultures and different ways of doing things, so we did a review to focus on 'Aspetar's way'. We did a lot of workshops to help identify our one mission. Getting people to create that 'one culture' and that sense that we have 'one mission' is difficult. We have over 50 different nationalities working in Aspetar. If we look at our diversity as a positive thing and that we share in our mission to assist the athletes achieve their potential, we can use that diversity as our strength rather than our weakness. We can show that people from so many countries can come together and create something so beautiful.

To tie all that together, it wasn't easy and maybe it wouldn't have been possible in other countries in the world. The golden age of Arabic medicine between 800 and 1200 AD brought many people to this region to learn. Did that tradition of this part of the world help make something like Aspetar possible?

We have a very good medical tradition in the Middle East. In the early stages of the Islamic empire something called the 'house of wisdom' was established in Baghdad. People from all over the world were invited to learn there. The problem with the Islamic world was there were a lot of cities in the Middle East, but they were like

islands separated by sand, so technological advances allowed ideas to spread faster. Now it is much faster still with the internet, and many ideas are moving at the same time. That interaction is what accelerates globalisation; it is really in the minds of people.

And what about you?

I think you have to be in the right place at the right time. I was lucky as an individual to be in the right country at the right time of its history, its resources, its leadership, globalisation and the right time of my maturity as well. All of these things come together. It is not because I am special. History gives you opportunity and confidence, but it also gives you responsibility because it sets the bar, so you have to work harder to reach a certain level.

How did you feel when Aspetar was recognised as a FIFA Medical Centre of Excellence?

It is not my achievement, it is Aspetar's achievement. There must be a sense of mission, but there must also be some kind of a target for you to achieve. The FIFA Medical Centre of Excellence accreditation provides us with a lot of things and allows the organisation to work towards a common objective. This level of quality allows you to achieve focus in an operational sense. The existence of this programme is amazing because it allows us to have a focus. When we received it, it gave us credibility and self-belief. It showed us the results of our hard work and dedication. And it feels great to have achieved this. But we know it is only a step, because you have to stay at it.

At Aspetar we have had our ups and downs and had to work extremely hard and we have to continue that philosophy. I think Aspetar has a lot it can offer us so I really feel proud of it.



Image: Dr Mohammed and current Director General of Aspetar, Dr Khalifa Alkuwari, celebrate Aspetar's 5th birthday.

You are one of only three people from the Arabic world on the FIFA Medical Committee. Are you proud of that?

I am very proud. I think I am on the FIFA Medical Committee because of Aspetar. As I said, Aspetar's success is not only down to me, it is down to so many people in the organisation. A lot of people have worked hard, so I think it is due to the recognition of what we have done at Aspetar.

You are President of the Qatar Red Crescent and were Vice-President of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Organisation. Have you found a way to combine your love of football with your humanitarian work?

Today there are more than 300 million football players around the world and FIFA is developing many humanitarian programmes in Africa and other disadvantaged regions.

I was at an awards ceremony a few months ago in Monte Carlo held by an organisation for sports and peace and there were some fantastic projects there. Qatar Red Crescent received 2nd place for our work creating football leagues inside refugee camps. Imagine what this can do for young people. It gives back life. We have created a way for people who have been fighting with each other to play football with each other. It is amazing what sport can do.

Do you think there is a lot we can learn from football?

I believe football can teach us about life. It teaches us that we need to be trained with the set of skills necessary for our position to perform to our highest level as individuals. We must also interact with each other within one organisation; one team. I think football can teach us that it is possible to work together as a team and to give everyone a fair chance in life. You have to prepare, perform and review as a team.



We show that people from so many countries can come together and create something so beautiful





Image: Dr Mohammed on a humanitarian visit to Pakistan, 2013.

In my opinion Football managers are the best managers in the world as they are under fire every week. When I work with a new organisation I always allow a period of two years, to fix things, but these guys don't have time. Every week they have to go and compete with other teams.

You are a huge fan of football and your two sons are active players. As a Qatari, what does FIFA's decision to hold the World Cup in 2022 in Qatar mean?

I think anybody has the right to dream, if you do your homework and work hard. I have no doubts about the decision to hold the World Cup in Qatar because I have experienced so many great competitions here. I am confident Qatar will do well.

Being part of it is the key. I don't think we expect to win the World Cup, but we can dream. You can be anywhere in the world and in a hopeless situation, but you can still dream of being the best footballer in the world. I am proud of my country that we made the decision to bid for the World Cup. It needed a lot of courage, to take that decision. It showed a lot of character for Qatari people and Qatari leaders.

It shows that FIFA is giving everybody in the world a chance. Why is it that only the big countries with strong footballing history which get to host the competitions? This decision goes to the core values of football.

You championed the idea of the Aspetar Sports Medicine Journal. Are you happy with the journal? Do you have any advice?

We discussed this journal from day one as we identified it as something which was essential to Aspetar's growth; however it

- 1991-1999:** Medical Centre of the Qatar Athletic Federation
- 1995-1999:** Chairman, GCC Sports Medicine Committee
- 1997-2006:** Board member, Hamad Medical Corporation
- 1999-2008:** CEO, Qatar Red Crescent
- 2000-2006:** Medical Commission of the Asian Olympic Council member
- 2003-2012:** Director General, Aspetar – Orthopaedic and Sports Medicine Hospital
- 2005:** Set up the Qatar Anti-doping Commission
- 2005-2008:** Board member and caretaker CEO, National Health Authority
- 2008-:** Vice-chairman then President, Qatar Red Crescent
- 2009-2013:** Vice-president, International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent
- 2009-:** FIFA Medical Committee member
- 2009-:** Board member and Vice-chairman, Executive Committee for the Supreme Council of Health, then Vice-chairman of the SCH
- 2011-:** Deputy Chairman, Asian Football Confederation Medical Committee
- 2011-:** Head of Development, Qatar National Health Strategy
- 2012-:** Set up the Qatar Anti-doping Laboratory and became Chairman of the Board of Trustees

took time as we had other priorities. It is a great product and I am very happy with it. We are lucky to have access of experts from all over the world to write for the journal and to some great athletes. The journal is fantastic. I think the most important thing if you start something you need is that to sustain it, to keep it alive, to keep it moving forward.

It is clear to see that you are great at putting together and creating a project and then leaving it for your (younger) colleagues to inherit. Looking at Aspetar, are you satisfied on how it is progressing?

When you build an organisation, it has to be able to survive, grow and build its characteristics. When we first built Aspetar I left a lot of space for people to handle themselves, and only taught them the methodology of organisational decision making.

To build a top organisation you have to leave it strong so it can carry on by itself. Keep a good relationship with whoever is there and be



Image: Aspeta staff.

their advisor, but eventually you have to step away. I have seen a lot of organisations based on one man, with the power, knowledge and planning concentrated to one person. That is not an institution, an institution needs to be able to survive and grow whoever is there. It doesn't need a visionary; the vision has to come from the organisation.

And finally what are your future projects?

Since leaving Aspeta I have been involved with the Qatar Anti-Doping Laboratory, I am Chairman of the Board of Trustees and we are at a stage where hopefully in a year I will hand that over too.

I am setting up an addiction rehabilitation centre; I already have a director and CEO in place. At the moment it is under construction. We are building the team, the concept is there, it's just a matter of carrying the project until it opens and stabilises and then I will also hand that over.

Another project we have is a national trauma and mass casualty hospital facility. It will take another five to six years to complete, so it is still at an early stage. We have to get the concept correct, that's the key and then the detail and operation will take another three or four years to start so it is at a different stage.

The Qatar Red Crescent is something I do voluntarily as well. We are working in over 45 different countries. It is satisfying because there are people in vulnerable situations and somebody has to be there for them and I try to have as much time as possible for that. But there is a good team there and each one of them is as strong as anybody in this world to run the organisation.

Nebojsa Popovic M.D., Ph.D.