

April 16, 2018

Speech at the Ministry of Public Health

By President Fadlo Khuri

Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen,

For years, the Lebanese health sector has shown remarkable resilience, despite the civil wars, economic downturns and political instabilities that have plagued the country for over six decades. Several reform initiatives implemented over the past decade have successfully contributed to improving the health sector performance and its maintaining a top ranking globally when compared to health systems in other countries. However, as we continue to celebrate these achievements, it is important to remind ourselves and others that the cost of health care is rapidly rising, driven by advanced technology, expensive therapies, and the discovery of new vaccines and medicines that are demanded by a population undergoing major demographic changes (e.g., more older adults), refugee crisis, rise in cardiovascular diseases, cancer, and other non-communicable diseases and injuries, and emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases. Such changes in health care necessitate efficiency-enhancing reforms to improve health outcomes.

There is global trend for the use of evidence to configure health systems, inform the best policy choices and guide the implementation of policies and programs. Evidence-informed decision-making uses the best available research, information and data to guide decisions at all stages of the policy process. It identifies what works, highlights gaps where evidence of program effectiveness is lacking, enables policymakers to use evidence in budget and policy decisions, and relies on systems to monitor implementation and measure key outcomes. Not surprisingly, numerous voices are calling for more effective and innovative approaches to bridge the gap between research and policymaking to ensure that policy is informed by robust evidence and that research addresses pressing policy priorities. Central to these approaches is bridging the academia-government divide.

Collaborations and partnerships, especially between governmental entities and academic institutions, are instrumental in making the right decisions or minimizing the chance of making the wrong ones. The interest in institutionalizing partnerships between academic institutions and the government has grown exponentially in the past decade, driven by the realization of the potential of academic institutions to “transform the interface between science and society”. Increasingly, the mission of universities is gradually shifting beyond the tradition of teaching, service and research towards a “fourth mission,” related to their ability to partner with the government and community to achieve lasting societal impact.

We gather here today to reinforce this fourth mission through the establishment of tripartite collaboration between the Ministry of Public Health (MOPH), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the Faculty of Health Sciences (FHS) at the American University of Beirut. This is a first of its kind or probably one of the few instances where an entity within an academic institution will be working closely with a ministry of health to strengthen and render into the mainstream the use of scientific evidence and tacit knowledge to inform its policy options and consequently that of the health sector.

The relationship between the MOPH and AUB, especially its Faculty of Health Sciences (FHS), has grown organically and symbiotically over the years. Indeed, the last decade has witnessed a shift in culture and thinking both at the MOPH and FHS, reflected in the growing understanding of the MOPH of the value of evidence in informing health policies, the ongoing support and commitment from WHO, and the relentless efforts from the Knowledge to Policy (K2P) Center at FHS as an advocate for institutionalizing the use of evidence in health policymaking.

The MOPH, through its strong commitment and leadership capacity for health sector reforms, has been able to transition from a phase where decisions were largely driven by intuition and 'learning by doing' to one where the MOPH is mobilizing evidence and tacit knowledge to inform policy decisions. Committed to strengthening the health care system of Lebanon, the MOPH has paid particular attention to the production of strategic and operational intelligence and to the understanding of stakeholder expectations and interests. Better information was useful to guide reform and contributed to the perception of the MOPH discourse as evidence based, objective and neutral.

Concurrently, FHS at AUB established its K2P Center in 2013, which is a forerunner in synthesizing evidence, contextualizing knowledge, and engaging policymakers and stakeholders to impact policies and actions in Lebanon and the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR). The K2P Center serves as a knowledge translation platform to further evidence-informed policymaking in Lebanon and the Region. The K2P Center is affiliated with the McMaster Health Forum in Canada and the Center for Systematic Reviews of Health Policy and Systems Research (SPARK) at AUB. It has been designated as a WHO Collaborating Center for Evidence informed Policy and Practice, making it the only WHO Collaborating Center for Evidence-Informed Policy and Practice in the EMR, and the second of its kind globally.

Since its official inception, the K2P Center has closely interacted with the MOPH and clearly identified it as a main partner interacting and collaborating closely to inform health policy priorities. Impressively, they have co-facilitated more than 10 national policy dialogues that have collectively convened more than 250 stakeholders to achieve impact on several priorities.

The relationship between the MOPH and K2P Center evolved naturally over the years progressing towards a more structured framework of interaction and collaboration. The close interaction between the MOPH and the K2P at FHS and their mutual realization of the need to complement operational data and tacit knowledge with local research and global evidence,

accelerated the “natural course of things” and planted the seeds for the concept of the Policy Support Observatory (PSO).

I am confident that April 16 presents yet another landmark for Lebanon; it marks the official launching of the PSO, rendering it the first initiative of its kind in Lebanon and the EMR. The PSO will provide structured analytical and decision support capacity to the MOPH, in line with its needs and making use of the various data sources that are available at the MOPH, accessible to it, or being developed by it alone or in collaboration with its academic and non-academic partners. This is exactly the kind of partnership between academia and the public sector that must solidify, grow and thrive if Lebanon and its citizens, as well as the citizens of the Arab World and beyond, are to develop real confidence in a better, healthier and more sustainable future.

While physically hosted at the MOPH, the PSO will be administered and operated by FHS. The plans and activities of the PSO will complement the work of K2P Center in promoting evidence-based and sustainable policy formation and implementation in support of the Ministry of Public Health, and consequently that of the health sector. The PSO and K2P will be independent entities with distinct roles sharing a common mandate and collaborating on common areas of interest.

In an era of post truth politics and ‘alternative fact’, we commend the MOPH for choosing to champion evidence, science and reason. We also commend and take pride in FHS and its K2P Center for being an instrumental partner in the transition towards institutionalizing evidence-informed health policymaking at the MOPH.

As President of the American University of Beirut, I express my full support for this joint effort and I am confident that it will become a model to follow in other countries in this region and beyond.