

## Emergence

# Stories from the frontlines - family physicians around the world responding to COVID-19 - episode 1 - Saudi Arabia

## A narrative collaboration between the Besroun Centre of the CFPC and CFP

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Interview with Dr. Baraa Alghalyini on March 18, 2020

(Saudi Arabia)



### Baraa's Biography

#### **"The community is tuned like an orchestra"**

Saudi Arabia has almost 90% of the population of Canada, contained in a much smaller region (33 million compared to our 37.6 million). As of March 18, 2020 - this nation has a very low rate of transmission of COVID-19, and each identified case was attributable to travel. The fact that they have been able to avoid community-transmission for as long as they have is remarkable.

It seems that the lessons learned by being affected by MERS (Middle Eastern Respiratory Syndrome, another coronavirus) were helpful, although "the impact was not as intense at the community level" in that case. Baraa also feels that Saudi Arabia learned important lessons from other nations, that all sectors collaborated amongst each other and with the community, and were able to get good adherence to social distancing policies. These policies were enacted after the fifth case was identified, a swift response indeed.

Baraa shared some poignant stories on how the Saudi Alzheimer's Society Instagram page created a thoughtful, emotional social media campaign. There are messages aimed for different groups - such as youth or elderly - short clips led by celebrities and local influencers to raise awareness of practices. A respected sheikh was in tears asking people to pray in their homes to avoid social interactions in the mosques. In Saudi Arabia, the handshake is "a strong social ritual" and it was important to curb the "welcoming gestures", but with time, she has noticed effectiveness.

*"Not only family members, but the entire community is in consensus. It feels like there's an entire orchestra going on and everybody is tuning to the same notes."*

Primary health care in Saudi Arabia is aiming its efforts at awareness; suspected cases are asked not to attend in the community. Family medicine clinics are minimizing direct care and the physicians are very active on social media. Baraa described so many interventions undertaken that match the CanMEDS-FM roles: expertise in family medicine, collaborators, communicators, health advocates, resource managers, as well as scholarly

activity in teaching others to serve in the frontlines if needed. The Ministry of Health is assisting in creating telehealth opportunities for primary care.

The adaptability of our generalist skill set is proving to serve Saudi Arabia well - "We [family physicians] probably see what other physicians don't. We have a different lens; we are very sensitive in feeling for others, detecting where we will be the best resource...We have this special connectivity to our people, to our community."

*"We understand and relate to the community. This is, by far, the most important key. We understand what are the needs for our society. We advocate towards the health and prevention for our community. We are very well equipped to communicate with our society in a way that we can fully engage them."*

Trust. Relationships. Connectivity.

Thank you, Baraa. Some important lessons indeed.

Listen to the podcast episode here: <https://cfppodcast.libsyn.com/covid-19-global-pandemic-and-family-medicine-saudi-arabia>

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