



“I wanted to demonstrate that female Emiratis can be good physicians”

DR LAYLA MOHAMED AL MARZOUKI

Assistant Director of the Health Regulation Department and the Head of Clinical Governance Office at the Dubai Health Authority

By: Inga Stevens, Informa Life Sciences Exhibitions, Dubai, UAE

If you master the art of learning at an early age, it will undoubtedly take you far in life. But while most of us only tend to realise this when it is too late, Dr Layla Mohamed Al Marzouki understood this as a young girl.

As we sit in her office at the Dubai Health Authority, three things are clear:

Firstly, her soft Irish lilt depicts her love for the country where she first entered the world of medicine having travelled there in 1992 in the footsteps of her older sister to pursue her dream of becoming a doctor. Secondly, her appreciation for her family's unwavering support; her father's words of wisdom still resonate strongly. And finally, her passion for education. With two master's degrees, a PhD and countless diplomas, Dr Layla's thirst for knowledge continues to bring her recognition and respect from both the medical community in the UAE and abroad.

Dr Layla, a mother of three from the UAE, is the Assistant Director of the Health Regulation Department and the Head of Clinical Governance Office at the Dubai Health Authority, a position she has held since 2009. Her rise through the ranks at the Dubai Health Authority has been meteoric, a clear testament to her determination to follow her family tradition to make her name as a respected physician.

"I come from a family of doctors. My older sister Fareeda is an oncology paediatrician. My cousins are both ophthalmologists. My sister-in-law is a family physician", explains Dr Layla. "But it was my father's desire for his children to pursue admirable professions that really inspired me to pursue and career medicine. He loves education and really pushed us to achieve, always rewarding us when we did well."

At the entrance interview for the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI), they asked Dr Layla why she wanted to study medicine. "I told them that I had always wanted to know what was going on in my own body. The human physiology fascinated me, it still does. To me, being in pain meant two sensations. The first one was the pain itself, and the other was me not knowing what is wrong with me."

Motivated by the desire to serve her home community in the UAE, Dr Layla wanted to lead by example. "I wanted to demonstrate that female Emiratis can be good physicians".

Dr Layla graduated from RCSI with a degree in medicine and surgery in 1999. This was a proud day for both father and daughter. "My father always had his fingerprint on my achievements. He was always there for me when I wavered. I remember complaining about having to sit exams during the Eid celebrations. His advice was that the day I passed my exams would be the day I can celebrate my personal Eid."

Internships are notoriously tough and Dr Layla's time as an intern at the Beaumont Hospital in Dublin was no exception. "I remember a little old dear who had a below-knee amputation. It was only after the theatre staff sent the leg to the mortuary that I was told by the family that they needed the leg for cremation. I will never forget having to sort through the mortuary to find the leg!"

Dr Layla went on to gain a General Internal Medical Professional Certificate from RCSI in 2002. The three-year programme allowed her to specialise in cardiology, a move that determined her career direction when her family returned to live in the UAE in 2002.

"The Cardiology and Cardiothoracic Surgery Center at the Dubai Hospital was my home for the next six years," Dr Layla recalls. "It was during this time that I became really interested in preventative medicine. I am currently studying for my PhD in Public Health from the UAE University and, despite being a broad discipline, I am interested in examining cardiovascular risk factors. My thesis involves a controlled trial of 400 obese participants with whom I will work closely with to help them lose weight. I always say prevention is better than the cure."

Dr Layla has worked on many Public Health awareness campaigns in the UAE. Educating children has always been close to her heart. "Arabic children do not know how to respond in an emergency situation. In Arabic films, people just run around screaming. This particular campaign involved hosting workshops for local school children to educate them on how to respond to an emergency in an age-appropriate way."

Governments in the region tend to emphasise tertiary care because the success of preventative care is often difficult to quantify. "Dubai is such a dynamic society; you educate someone one day and the next day they move away. Outcomes are difficult to measure."

Despite these challenges, the healthcare environment in Dubai has been transformed in the last 20 years. "The main improvements have been in the quality of care," says Dr Layla. "We now attract an exceptionally high caliber of staff and our healthcare facilities are regulated and accredited by international bodies. People are more inclined to trust the levels of care offered here in Dubai, however, there is always room for improvement. As a Health Regulation Department, it is our responsibility to work on it."

Indeed, private healthcare in Dubai appears to be booming and the Emirate is also quickly becoming a hub for medical tourism for specific specialities. Centres of Excellence for maternity, paediatrics and oncology can now be found within Dubai and the rest of the UAE.

Representing Dubai on the global arena is also part of Dr Layla's remit. "Dubai must have a voice in the international regulatory →



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environment," she says. "We have been invited to share our experience as the only regulatory body in the International Association of Medical Regulatory Authorities (IAMRA) that regulates both facilities and professionals. Others may be able to emulate our regulatory model."

In 2008, Dr Layla was the first UAE national to obtain a Masters in Cardiovascular Rehabilitation, a course that examines how to get people back on track after a heart attack. Dr Layla also graduated with distinction with an Executive Masters in Healthcare Administration from the Zayed University in Abu Dhabi in 2010.

Further education demands a lot of time, determination and money. And most importantly, time away from your family. Dr Layla and her husband of 12 years, Fareed, have three children, Nasser, 10, Abeer, 6, and Amal, 5. "I was constantly on the road and he was always there to help look after the children. He supported my choices and helped me excel."

There is no such thing as being a Wonder Woman. Or, at least, Dr Layla is yet to find the magic solution to managing life as a mother and as a physician. "If you spend your time at work, it is at the expense of your children. When you leave work early to be with your children, your work will pile up. My life is all about compromise. You have to trust your instincts to guide you on how best to manage your responsibilities", explains Dr Layla.

Children often idolise their parents and Dr Layla's family is no exception. "When I look at Abeer I say 'Mashallah, God has given us

another Layla'. She is a carbon copy of me. If she wanted to pursue a career in medicine, I would give her my full support but with certain prerequisites."

Encouraging female Emiratis to pursue a career in medicine is in Dr Layla's DNA, but she urges them to keep in mind the social requirements expected from them as a woman, when considering their career path in medicine. "Choosing a speciality that does not require you to be 'on call' will minimise the disruption to your personal life," she advises. "Medicine will never hinder your family life if you have your path clearly mapped out."

Indeed, Dr Layla seems to have the balance just right. She has enjoyed endless accolades for her work. Personal achievements, educational milestones, committee chair positions, you name it, she has excelled. "Being recognised for the work that I do is certainly a driving factor in my career," says Dr Layla. "Everyone likes to be encouraged and appreciated and I hope that this public recognition will serve as an example to others."

Despite all of her career and educational success, Dr Layla remains humble in her ability to change people's lives. "Everyone has the ability to change someone's life, not just doctors or nurses. Taking the time to listen to someone, to lend a hand, can make a lasting difference to someone in need. Just today, having spent ten minutes enquiring about the wellbeing of a colleague who seemed a little down, I was able to make a difference to how she felt. This is invaluable". 🙏