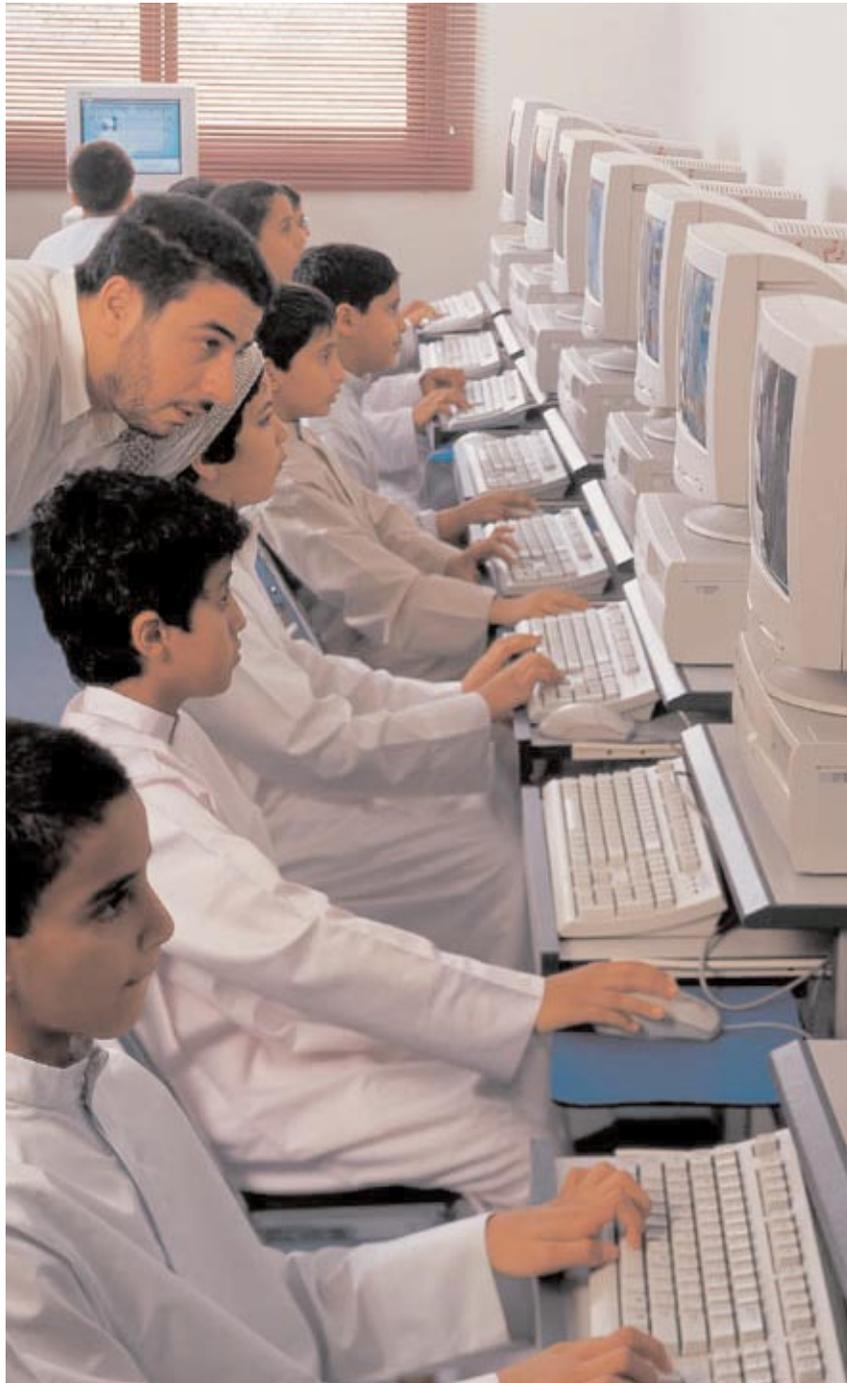


SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT



SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

THE ENORMOUS STRIDES MADE in economic and infrastructural development in the UAE in the past 30 years have been discussed in previous chapters. As can be expected these unprecedented changes, coupled with a rapid increase in population following decades of immigration (from an estimated 86,000 in 1958 to approximately 3.3 million today) have had an enormous impact on the lives of the UAE's citizens.

Urbanisation has proceeded at a fast pace, so much so that the vast majority of UAE nationals now live in urban locations in modern fully-serviced housing and have access to a high standard of education for their children, from kindergarten to university. Communication with the outside world has also been revolutionised. Most houses have satellite television connecting them to the far corners of the globe, many have Internet access. Investment in the country's government-funded health services has radically altered infant mortality rates and significantly increased life expectancy, ensuring that UAE society has the health to enjoy its much-improved quality of life.

These developments are reflected in the 2001 UN Human Development Index (HDI), which measures the overall achievements in a country in three basic dimensions, longevity, knowledge and a decent standard of living. According to these criteria, the UAE is now amongst the top 48 countries in the world with a high standard of human development and is ranked forty-fifth out of a total of 162 countries worldwide.

SOCIAL WELFARE

Despite the undeniable improvements that have been made in the standard of living in the UAE, there is an awareness that vulnerable members of society can be at risk in even the most developed nations. The government has therefore instituted a comprehensive federal social welfare system operated by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.

In July 1999 the Federal National Council approved new legislation regulating social security benefits. Under the law, people entitled to monthly social benefits include national widows and divorced women, the disabled and the handicapped, the aged, orphans, single daughters, married students, relatives of jailed dependants, estranged wives and insolvents. Also eligible for social security benefits are widowed and divorced national women previously married to foreigners. The social security committee will also consider applications from national women married to foreign spouses whose incomes are regarded as inadequate.

In 2001, the budget of the Ministry was Dh862,500,000 million, of which around Dh650 million was allocated for social welfare payments. Other social security assistance costs were estimated at around Dh1.9 billion, with one special programme, ordered by President Sheikh Zayed in September 2000, involving the payment of a grant of Dh 20,000 to each of 800 widows.

Under rules agreed by the Council of Ministers in April 2001, a sum of Dh1250 per month was set as the payment for the head of a family requiring assistance. Dh750 was set as the payment for the second member, and Dh375 for any further members.

During the period from May 1999 to December 2000, a total of nearly 50,000 people received social assistance worth Dh173,700,000. Of this number, 36,295 worked in the private sector, 10,000 in the Government and 3700 in the security forces.

The Ministry also allocates resources to women's organisations to ensure that all those in need, particularly women in rural areas, have access to an economic safety net to assist them in adapting to a fast-changing world.

In addition to the federal system, welfare institutions are in place in individual emirates. For example, the Office of the President's Wife for Local Women's Affairs and Social Services provides assistance to local families. Assistance covers poor families, widows and divorced women, relatives of jailed dependants, the disabled and the unemployed.

An important role in social welfare, as well as in cultural and community affairs, is also played by the country's voluntary organisations. By late 2001, 106 such bodies were registered with the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, including 28 folklore groups, 17 community organisations, 17 vocational bodies, 11 cultural and ten theatre groups and the nine women's associations that are together grouped in the General Women's Union. Also included in the total are the numerous philanthropic and humanitarian societies.



While remaining determined to maintain a safety net for the needy in society, the UAE has also taken steps to establish a formal structure to permit both employers and employees to contribute towards retirement pensions. A Public Corporation for Social Service and Pensions was established in 1999 with a capital of Dh500 million, which will lay the groundwork for the future development of a comprehensive pensions programme for UAE citizens in the years ahead. The Corporation became a member of the International Organisation for Society Security in February 2000.

EDUCATION

The provision of a high standard of education is recognised as a fundamental component of the government's strategy to encourage the young people of the UAE to play a productive role in the social and economic development of the country. To this end, free education from kindergarten to University level is provided for all UAE nationals. The opportunities offered have been enthusiastically embraced by the youth of the country.

In the academic year 2000–2001, there were a total of around 640,000 students in education. Of these, 322,250 were being educated in 747 government schools and a further 234,540 in 426 private schools. A further 3784 youngsters were being educated in a network of 18 centres administered by the General Women's Union. By way of comparison, in 1962, there were only 20 schools in the Emirates, with 4000 students, while in 1971, the year the UAE federation was established, there were 74 schools with 32,800 students.

The balance of the total number of students is accounted for by the higher education sector, (see below).

EDUCATION 2020 STRATEGY

Despite the huge improvement in educational standards that has taken place since the establishment of the state, there is deep awareness that constant reassessment and increased budgetary funding is required to ensure that standards, especially in government schools, are maintained. In particular, the Ministry of Education is focusing on the implementation of the Education 2020 Strategy, which is based on several five-year plans, in order to introduce advanced education techniques, improve innovative skills and the self-learning abilities of students. To this end, it has established a number of model schools

in the country to implement the strategy. These schools introduce multimedia tools and the latest educational methods to encourage students to interact with modern technologies in their everyday life.

The Ministry has also established the Planning, Development and Evaluation Office to design, implement and follow up development plans in the education sector. The office formulates goals for the education process and introduces programmes to achieve these goals. It also assesses the feasibility of education projects and monitors their implementation. The National Centre for the Development of Curriculum and Methodology also plays an essential role in reviewing curricula and introducing necessary amendments to keep pace with international developments in educational methodology.

Some of the immediate impacts of Education 2020 are being felt in class structures. Law No.185/1 for the year 2001 caters for gifted students and provides special streams whereby they can complete their education in a shorter timeframe. Classes at primary and elementary levels are to be organised as follows: there will be five grades in the primary stage instead of the current six, and four grades in the elementary stage instead of the present three. The three-grade secondary stage will remain unchanged.

In 2003 the science and arts branches will be combined to ensure that all students are equipped with a broad-based educational background.

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY EDUCATION PROJECT

The General Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Information Technology Education Project for Secondary Schools, which was launched in March 2000 for secondary schools in Dubai, was later expanded in 2001 to cover secondary level public schools in Abu Dhabi. All Abu Dhabi secondary public schools will be equipped with brand new computer laboratories. All computer labs at every secondary school, whether in Dubai or Abu Dhabi, are to be identical in both design and function. Each laboratory will be equipped with 35 computers.

Phase one of the project began with the setting up of one computer lab at Imam Malik Secondary School in Dubai in March 2000. Phase two includes implementation in all public secondary schools in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, with the aim of reaching every secondary school student in the UAE in the third and final phase.

The third phase is to include establishment of the Abu Dhabi IT Academy, which will mirror the role played by the Dubai IT Academy. The latter

distributes student curriculum material directly to computer servers at each computer lab at every school via an integrated network.

The Abu Dhabi and Dubai IT academies will also serve as a training ground for computer teachers and instructors. For example, teachers at school computer labs were required to undergo 50 hours of training two weeks prior to the first day of school.

The Ibhār Internet café, a non-profit facility for students and teachers located within the Dubai IT Academy premises, has been adopted as a model for similar facilities that will be set up at public secondary schools around Dubai as part of the third phase of the IT project. These cafés will not be located on the school premises but in nearby strategic locations.

E-store Project

A new online marketplace to deliver educational material, including IT hardware, software, books and other learning tools is another component of the Information Technology Education Project. The e-store project, the first of its kind in the Middle East, will be carried out in partnership with Intershop, a leading provider of e-business software, in three phases and will be completed in the year 2003.

The first phase of the e-store project will cover secondary and high school students in Dubai and Abu Dhabi. More than 23 suppliers will catalogue IT hardware, software and networking equipment, in addition to books, stationery and other educational tools for purchase over the Internet. The second phase of the e-store will be ready by March 2002, by which time the management hopes to have achieved its goal of providing each secondary school student in the UAE with a computer. The items displayed in the e-store will be offered at special rates. Payment for purchases made online through the education market place will be cash-on-delivery to promote ease of use and security. The market place will be hosted locally. Top students will be nominated to work as administrators on the marketplace, where they will gain genuine on-the-job IT training that will enhance their skills.

PRIVATE EDUCATION LAW

New by-laws covering private education came into effect during 2001, to implement Federal Law No. 28 of 1999. These by-laws annul all previous contradictory ministerial decisions. The by-laws govern the procedures for licensing private schools and institutions, stipulate specifications for school



buildings, regulate curricula, admission age of students, payment of school fees, appointment of teachers and administrative staff, minimum wages and employment conditions for teachers, student disciplinary matters, and setout sanctions for violations of the by-laws, among other issues.

The by-laws give priority in appointment of teachers and administrative staff in private schools to UAE nationals, as well as to Arabs and expatriates living in the country. Schools are required to segregate boys and girls from class five onwards, with exemption for non-Arabic schools where the majority of students are non-Muslims, provided that they obtain permission from the Cabinet. The new regulations also stipulate that the number of students in kindergarten should not exceed 25 per classroom, while in higher classes the number of students should not exceed 30 per classroom.

Under the new regulations all private schools in the country will be required to teach Islamic studies, Arabic language and social studies as compulsory subjects in accordance with the approved syllabus of the Ministry of Education and Youth. Islamic studies is a compulsory subject for all Muslims and Arabic language is compulsory for all Arab students. Non-Arab students are to study Arabic according to the Ministry's special syllabus for non-Arabs. Private schools will be required to teach social studies according to the Ministry's syllabus. A school, however, may offer its own social studies course according to the curriculum it follows.

The Ministry of Education and Youth (MOEY) has also issued ministerial decree No. 4443 for 2001, a detailed guide for equating the high school diplomas issued by private schools in the UAE with the Ministry's own secondary school certificate.

GSSC EXAMS

Girls outshone boys and dominated the top ten list of the UAE General Secondary School Certificate (GSSC) 2001 exams for the fifth consecutive year. In the literature stream, 17 girls and one boy shared the top ten places while 35 girls and 18 boys shared the top ten positions in the science stream.

In the literature stream the success rate reached 77.7 per cent compared to 75.2 per cent in 2000, while in science it went up to 91.4 per cent from 86.8 per cent in 2000. In the science stream, government schools achieved a success rate of 93.5 per cent, private schools 89.6 per cent, home studies programme 60.2 per cent, and evening studies centres 41.1 per cent. In the literature stream, the success rate for government schools was 89.8 per cent,

for private schools 84.6 per cent, 35 per cent for those in home studies programmes and 46.7 per cent for evening studies centres.

The GSSC results for 2001 were available on the Internet for the first time.

HIGHER EDUCATION

UAE youth have ready access to higher education, at United Arab Emirates University (UAEU) in Al Ain, at Zayed University in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, at 11 Higher Colleges of Technology (HCTs) throughout the country and at the many internationally accredited private institutions that are being established in the UAE, as well as in special colleges established by, for example, the Armed Forces, and ETISALAT, the country's telecommunications provider. Generous grants for overseas courses are also available from the federal Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research and from other bodies.

In 2001, the number of students applying for higher education set a new world record in terms of the percentage of applicants. In the UAE, over 95 per cent of female students and over 80 per cent of male students attained a place in higher education in the 2001–2002 academic year. The comparative figure is between 35 per cent and 45 per cent in Europe and between 50 per cent and 60 per cent in the US.

The number of students who applied for admission to higher education institutions increased by 9.1 per cent, from 10,804 in 2000–2001 to 11,787 in 2000–2002. Sixty-four per cent of the applicants are women. Out of those who applied, 10,623 or 90.1 per cent were approved for admission.

A total of 5056 admissions were approved for the UAE University, 5000 for the Higher Colleges of Technology and 567 for Zayed University.

Higher Colleges of Technology

The network of Higher Colleges of Technology was established in 1988. Now operating in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Al Ain, Ra's al-Khaimah and Fujairah, they provide three years' technical training in skills such as business administration, accounting, banking, information systems, computers, engineering, aviation technology, and health sciences. These courses are designed to prepare nationals for professional and technological careers in both government and private sectors. Since their foundation, the colleges have grown dramatically, with staff and students increasing by about 30 per cent each year. More than 18,000 students were in the HCT system at the beginning of the 2001 academic year.

Zayed University

Zayed University (ZU) was established in 1998 with campuses in Abu Dhabi and Dubai in order to meet the needs of human resources development in the UAE. Emphasis on acquiring life-long learning skills to assist in adapting to the needs of the marketplace, as well as a focus on information technology and the forging of partnerships with government and private bodies all play a vital role in helping ZU achieve its goals.

In particular, strategic links have been forged with Dubai Media City (DMC) to ensure that ZU students receive the best possible training in new technology. To this end, a memorandum of understanding (MoU) governing the training of UAE youth in e-commerce skills was signed in June 2001 between the Institute of Technological Innovation (ITI) at ZU and Tejari.com, an e-commerce provider, at the ITI campus at DMC. According to the MoU, Tejari.com will impart e-commerce skills to the students through ITI facilities at the DMC campus. Courses will initially focus on educating Tejari's trading partners in the market place's latest features and functionality. Later phases of the project will include the provision of hands-on skills development to address the region's growing need for trained IT professionals. 2395 students were following courses at the two campuses in September 2001.

UAE University

UAE University in Al Ain was established in 1976. In the last 25 years it has become a leading institution in education, research and community service. The University now has nine faculties, 1200 teaching staff and over 16,000 students. In March 2001, 2926 students, of which 2361 were women, graduated from the University. Overall, from the time of its establishment until the end of the 2000 academic year, a total of 26,519 students have graduated from the University.

The master plan for the new UAE University town in the inland oasis city of Al Ain was recently completed. The new purpose-designed facility will be built on roughly 350 hectares of land in Al Maqam district, bringing together in one place all the facilities that are currently scattered around Al Ain. Al Maqam currently houses a number of university facilities, including five women's hostels, and a huge student activity centre. The University is currently undergoing extensive development. In addition to several short-, medium- and long-term projects, a technology park with an industrial outreach programme is envisaged.



In another development at the UAE University over the last year, the Faculty of Agriculture has been converted into a College of Food Systems, covering all food aspects such as food security, harvest techniques and scientific research, processing, marketing and distribution and consumer services. This is in contrast to the traditional production-only role of the agricultural college. The new college will place great emphasis on developing agricultural and fisheries products for world markets. The new direction for the College of Food Systems addresses the need to understand consumer attitudes and behaviour through the introduction of a unique degree programme in 'Consumer Science'. The new college will also boost the industrial sector by encouraging more food processing plants and open new avenues for the industry.

New Institutes

The Zayed Institute for Research and Technology was established in June 2001. The institute aims to attract accomplished researchers and scientists to become active members, ensuring that Abu Dhabi will become a globally recognised centre of excellence for the development of advanced technology. The institute will focus on solving many of the problems facing mankind, working for the benefit of humanity as a whole. Areas of research will include medicine, agriculture, the environment and information technology.

The recently established Petroleum Institute, based in Abu Dhabi, has signed a ten-year cooperation agreement with Colorado School of Mines. The new Institute, established by the Abu Dhabi government as an independent legal entity, is committed to the education of students in the fields of engineering and applied science that support and advance the petroleum industry in the UAE and the surrounding regions. It opened on 15 September 2001 for selected UAE National Secondary School students (science stream) and intends to offer baccalaureate and graduate degrees. It will also carry out research to support curriculum replenishment, advanced studies and industry innovation, and will host continuing education programmes for practising professionals.

The Private Sector

Another highlight of the higher educational sector in recent years has been the rapid growth of private higher educational institutions. Among these are the American Universities of Sharjah and Dubai, with 2300 and 1205 students respectively, which follow an American model and have won plaudits for their dedication not only to teaching but also to research. Others include the Ajman

University of Science and Technology and Sharjah University, while several foreign universities have also opened up branches or distance-learning centres in the UAE. Many of these private institutions, teach in English, as do the government institutions for some courses. As a result of the expansion both of the government and of the private sector institutions, families of both citizens and expatriates now have the option to educate their children in the country, if they so wish, with a consequent benefit for family stability.

Overseas "Venturers"

But it is not all hard work for UAE students. In 2001 four nationals from the Dubai Men's College (DMC), part of the HCT network, visited the jungles of Belize, trekked the Gobi desert in Mongolia and performed community work in Namibia on a 10-week expedition with Raleigh International. Three of the students were sponsored by the HSBC Middle East Foundation and one was sponsored by the British Business Group in Dubai. The 'venturers' working with 200 other Raleigh participants were involved in various community projects like building schools in rural areas, assisting in scientific and environmental research and adventure projects such as trekking and mountaineering. During the intensive training period, participants had to concentrate on personal development, cultural awareness, global issues and survival skills. The students were selected following a weekend of activities in November 2000 where they were assessed by their teamwork projects and physical fitness.

ILLITERACY

Despite huge improvements in education some members of society, especially the older generation, remain educationally disadvantaged. The Ministry of Education and Youth announced in September 2001, on the occasion of International Illiteracy Eradication Day, that it has mapped out a five-year strategy to remedy this situation and eradicate illiteracy. The illiteracy rate has fallen to 7 per cent among people in the 15–45 year age group, compared to 72 per cent in 1972; the Ministry hopes, through a number of pioneering projects, to reduce it still further. Among the projects on the agenda is the education programme for illiterate adults working in government bodies whose jobs prevent them from joining evening classes. A budget of almost Dh220,000 has been allocated for the programme. The Ministry plans to establish more adult education centres across the country and is adopting

new measures to make the environment in adult education classes appealing to those learners who are dropping out midway before completing their studies.

Adult education centres in the UAE are providing a ray of hope to people who missed out on appropriate learning opportunities as children. By attending school later in life, many of them have been able to finish their basic education and continue further studies. Between 1980 and 2000, 12,627 men and 18,258 women completed the primary phase. During the same period 4871 men and 8198 women finished their high school studies in Adult Education Centres and went on to study at university.

EMPLOYMENT

The demographic structure of the UAE's population, including, in particular, the fact that a very large percentage of UAE citizens are under the age of 21, has meant in the past that there has been a relatively low participation of citizens in the labour force. Now, however, with tens of thousands of young Emiratis completing their education and entering the job market every year, steps are being taken to 'emiratis' the work force and utilise their skills. The private sector is being encouraged to provide training to ensure that citizens, including women, are integrated swiftly into the work force. The Government is already offering incentives aimed at encouraging firms to replace foreign workers with trained nationals. In the banking sector, special quotas have helped to increase employment by citizens. Government-related bodies like the oil and gas companies and telecommunications provider Etisalat have long had an extensive, and successful, programme for recruiting and training UAE citizens, as, indeed, have Government Ministries and local Departments.

The Government is aware that retraining may be required to ensure graduates have appropriate skills. As a result, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs set up Tanmia – the national Human Resource Development and Employment Authority. Tanmia has a Dh40 million budget to train nationals in the skills required to take up positions in the private sector. The number of UAE nationals seeking employment is expected to reach 300,000 by 2006. A large number of job seekers are university and specialist college graduates, and the total number of secondary school graduates seeking employment between 2002 and 2006 is expected to touch 107,087, while the number of unemployed UAE university graduates during the next four years is expected to be 47,887. The number of unemployed graduates from the Colleges of Higher Technology is expected to reach 22,889 over the same period.



Statistics compiled by the Authority indicate that 54 per cent of the UAE national workforce in the public and private sectors were skilled labour including 26 per cent working as department directors and business managers, 13 per cent as professional workers and 26 per cent as clerks.

In 2001 Tanmia launched a unique programme to help UAE nationals who are registered with them to find jobs. The programme was jointly developed by the Centre for Excellence in Applied Research and Training (CERT), the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) and Tanmia. It aims to provide opportunities for nationals to acquire the skills, knowledge and values they need to perform effectively in the labour market. The first 12-week training programme began on 8 September 2001 with 40 trainees. The men and women enrolled for 'Work Readiness in an Office Environment' and are developing skills in modern office procedures and office management. The instruction, in Arabic and English, aims to develop skills in business communications, knowledge of business practices, computing and mathematics.

Tanmia is currently working on setting up the Labour Market Information System, a web-portal that will allow UAE national job-seekers access to information about specific job opportunities available in various employment sectors in the UAE.

The system is expected to be ready in the first quarter of 2002, and will also provide employers a means to express their staffing needs by posting jobs online.

WOMEN

Women in particular have wholeheartedly embraced the impressive educational opportunities made available to them. Female students are in the majority at all levels of higher education in the country. Women are also achieving excellent results in their studies, outstripping their male counterparts at every turn. Sheikha Fatima bint Mubarak, Sheikh Zayed's wife and Chairperson of the General Women's Union, has said that women have no choice but to excel in education to compensate for the long years that they have endured without the light of knowledge prior to the establishment of the federation. Equal access to education is zealously guarded.

Access to education has given UAE women the opportunity to participate alongside men in the development of their country. Today, UAE women are



making their presence felt in society as civil servants, university professors, teachers, lawyers, engineers, doctors, under-secretaries, business women, administrators, and as members of the police force and the army.

The belief that women are entitled to take their place in society is grounded in the UAE Constitution which guarantees the principles of social justice for all, in accordance with the precepts of Islam. Under the Constitution, women enjoy the same legal status, claim to titles, access to education, and the same right to practise professions as men. The guarantees enshrined in the Constitution have been carried through into implementing legislation.

GENERAL WOMEN'S UNION

A legislative framework by itself would not have been sufficient to achieve the level of emancipation experienced by UAE women today. Understanding that organisation was required at the grassroots level, Sheikha Fatima founded Abu Dhabi Women's Society, the first women's society in the country, on 8 February 1973. The success of the Abu Dhabi association led to the creation of the Dubai Women's Development Society, the Sharjah Women's Development Society, the Umm al-Mou'meneen Women's Development Society in Ajman, the Umm al-Qaiwain Women's Development Society and the Ra's al-Khaimah Women's Development Society. These societies were subsequently linked together under the UAE Women's Federation which was established on 27 August 1975, again presided over by Sheikha Fatima. The UAE Women's Federation, recently renamed as the General Women's Union, and housed in a magnificent new premises in Abu Dhabi, is an autonomous body with its own budget.

To date, the union has played an important role in assisting the women of the UAE to realise their full potential.

Depending on the geographical size of the emirate, the individual societies in the union may have more than one branch and there are now over 30 branches of the six societies, many operating in remote areas of the country. Activities undertaken by the individual branches, often in association with the Ministry of Health and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), include impressive health education and literacy programmes, nursery classes, housekeeping, dressmaking and handicraft classes, art classes, child care advice, vocational training projects, language and computer courses, job placement programmes, religious education, welfare assistance, family mediation services, as well as a busy calendar of social, cultural and sporting activities.



The priority of the Women's Union in the early days was to help women emerge from seclusion, use their leisure time to become literate, and acquire knowledge about the modern world, in order to enable them to raise their family's standard of living. Having achieved much in this area, today's goals are linked to comprehensive social planning in the country, with a view to combating negative social phenomena and increasing social cohesiveness within a framework of Islamic values.

CHILD WELFARE

As part of their programme of child welfare, the UAE General Women's Union organised the Third Child Festival in Abu Dhabi from 30 October to 7 November 2001 under the patronage of Sheikha Fatima, Chairperson of the Union. The festival focused attention on children's causes at the local and international level.

A conference was organised alongside the festival to discuss and highlight child-related issues. The Cabinet's approval of a federal draft law on the creation of a higher council for childhood and maternity was announced at the conference to coincide with World Child Day and international campaigns to protect rights of children. The Council, which will coordinate public and private efforts on child welfare and coordinate relations with regional and international organisations, notably the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), was a very welcome development.

During the Childhood Festival Sheikha Fatima was honoured by UNICEF as Personality of the Year 2001 in recognition of her untiring efforts on behalf of children worldwide.

Accepting the title on behalf of all UAE women, Sheikha Fatima commented that the UAE was committed to the International Convention on the Rights of the Child and is keen to implement all of its articles in accordance with the UAE's culture, heritage and Arab and Islamic traditions. Sheikha Fatima also expressed her deep concern about the poor conditions suffered by children worldwide as a result of armed conflicts, disease and poverty, re-iterating the importance of exerting more efforts to end these conflicts and protect children.

By November 2001 a draft law on children's rights was being reviewed by the Federal Government to serve as a guideline to the authorities to fulfil the needs of children in the country.

Earlier in 2001, Sheikha Fatima was honoured by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) who presented her with a gold pin, its



supreme token of appreciation for involvement in refugee issues and for her financial and other assistance to refugee women.

The UN High Commissioner praised Sheikha Fatima for her clear thinking on issues affecting women, especially those who have been forced into exile around the world. He pointed out that the personal commitment of Sheikha Fatima had generated considerable public interest in the UAE, not only with regard to the plight of refugee women, but also refugees in general.

Several special centres for the rehabilitation of disadvantaged children have also been established two in Dubai and one in Abu Dhabi, being opened during 2001. The centres operate under the supervision of Sheikha Shamsa bint Hamdan Al Nahyan, head of the women's section of the UAE Red Crescent Society, and are intended to help the children adjust to society. A similar centre opened in Sharjah in 2000.

For those who are physically or mentally disabled, the Zayed Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Handicapped, established in 1995, offers a protected environment. Administered by the Abu Dhabi Municipality in association with the UN Development Programme, the Centre has an 11 hectare farm outside Abu Dhabi where 20 handicapped people work on the production of foodstuffs. Having shown its success, the Centre is now to be expanded with the addition of a further 10 hectares of land and 18 greenhouses.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

UAE women have played an active role in the international women's movement, always taking care to ensure that proper attention is paid to the recognition of the differences between religions, cultures and traditions. The UAE strongly believes that Islam offers guarantees for the position of women that can act as a useful example to the rest of the world. With this overall philosophy, the UAE General Women's Union has participated in all of the major international women's conferences over the last few decades, beginning with that held in New Mexico in 1975, followed by Copenhagen in 1980, Nairobi in 1985 and Beijing in 1995.

The UAE was elected, along with five other Asian nations, to a four-year membership of the Women's Committee of the 54-member UN Economic and Social Council, commencing in 2002.

At the end of 2001, the UAE through Sheikha Fatima and the General Women's Union expressed its full support for the creation of the Arab Women Organisation (AWO) as a practical translation of Arab women's aspirations.

The UAE General Women's Union is establishing a detailed national database on UAE women. This database is the first of its kind in the Arab world, and will contribute significantly to the exchange of information with women throughout the region. An important role in the dissemination of the material will be played by the web site established by the West Asia Regional Office of the United Nations Women's Organisation (UNIFEM).

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Despite the major advances in emancipation of women in the UAE, there is a general awareness that more needs to be done. One area of concern is the inability of some well-educated women to take up employment despite the fact that the majority of HCT and university graduates are women.

Studies have shown that the low female participation in the workforce is partly due to custom and tradition, while economic prosperity means that employment is a matter of choice, rather than of necessity. There are also indications that the educational qualifications obtained by many of the UAE's women are not always those most in demand in the job market. Scarcity of jobs is another factor. In addition, a significant number of UAE women cease working after marriage and bearing children, partly because of an insufficiency of child-care centres, and partly because of the well-founded belief that maternal care is likely to be more beneficial for their children.

Retraining, especially in information technology skills, and the generous maternity leave regulations guaranteed by a new draft law should be of assistance in removing some of these obstacles. Incentives, including the introduction of more family-friendly working hours and support for business opportunities that would allow women to work from home, will also help.

Another problem that has been identified is the failure of women to take up employment in a wider range of professions. Although barriers have crumbled in recent years, there is still a strong emphasis on the government, health and education sectors. The majority of women have chosen to work in government establishments where they represent 47 per cent of the total number of government employees. National women occupy 40 per cent of the senior positions in various government departments and administrations and 15 per cent of working women are professors in higher education institutions.

Five women were appointed to the Sharjah Consultative Council in 2001, a measure heralded as an historic step towards allowing women to participate in the country's decision-making process at a political level.

MARRIAGE

The Marriage Fund was instituted by the Government in 1993 to assist the UAE's youth to marry and start family life with the least possible financial burden. Recognising that the high cost of marriage in the UAE, including lavish wedding receptions and expensive dowries, was encouraging UAE men to marry foreign wives, leaving many national women unmarried and leading to social instability, Sheikh Zayed decreed that the Marriage Fund would offer substantial long-term loans (up to Dh70,000) to young UAE men wishing to marry UAE women, in order to defray matrimonial expenses. Nationals over 30 years of age are entitled to an additional Dh20,000 if they marry.

The fund also gives grants to divorcees who have not previously benefited from the fund or benefited but have logical reasons to seek further aid.

At the same time Sheikh Zayed has waged a vocal and successful campaign against the practice of high dowries and extravagant weddings. Upper limits of Dh50,000 have been set for dowries and the prohibition on lavish weddings can now be enforced by legal sanctions: a prison sentence or a Dh500,000 fine for the couples concerned. Special wedding halls have been built where celebrations can be held without the expenses that would be incurred in other venues. Group or mass weddings are also becoming a popular way of avoiding these excesses.

By staging mass weddings the Fund saved Dh150 million, almost 40 per cent of the ordinary expenses spent on wedding ceremonies, for the public in the first four years of its existence.

According to a survey conducted by the Fund, the total number of beneficiaries up to 31 December 2000 was 25,143, 9028 from Abu Dhabi, 4014 from Dubai, 4693 from Sharjah, 3788 from Ra's al-Khaimah, 1206 from Ajman, 594 from Umm al-Qaiwain, and 1820 from Fujairah.

Applications for Marriage Fund support reached a record 4081 in 2000. There were 4054 successful applicants, 1457 from Abu Dhabi, 625 from Dubai, 757 from Sharjah, 612 from Ra's al-Khaimah, 184 from Ajman, 89 from Umm al-Qaiwain, and 330 from Fujairah.

The growing popularity of the Marriage Fund placed a strain on resources, with government allocations of Dh1.674 billion from 1993 to 2000 proving insufficient to meet the expenditure, including loans granted during that period. The Dh250 million allocation for 2000 by the Government to the fund proved insufficient to meet demand, and 27 applicants were put on reserve to benefit from the increased Dh300 million budgetary allocation in 2001.

AVERAGE MARRIAGE AGE

A recent study by the Ministry of Health has produced interesting results on the effects of modernisation on the age at which men and women marry in the UAE.

According to the report, the average age for marriage among women in the UAE is between 25 and 29 years, while in men it is between 30 and 34 years, with differences arising according to educational level and between urban and rural areas.

The report indicated that 68 per cent of women between 25 and 29 years are married; that figure rises to 83 per cent at the age of 34, and 88 per cent at the age of 39. A peak of 98.4 per cent for men is reached at the age of 55.

There is a positive relation between education and the age of marriage: 61 per cent of illiterate women marry between the ages of 15 and 19. The figure is 27 per cent for women with an incomplete primary education and a mere 7 per cent for women with a primary or higher education. The differences are less obvious in the 20 to 24 year age group, but there is still a significant disparity between women with preparatory education and those who have graduated from secondary and university programmes.

The study also showed that decisions of educated women about when to marry and whom to marry are less influenced by the traditional forces that have favoured early marriage and marriage to a relative.

Concerning discrepancies between urban and rural areas, the study showed that women in rural areas were married at relatively younger ages than those in urban areas: approximately 39 per cent of women in urban areas in the 20 to 24 age group are married compared to 51 per cent in rural areas. The figure for urban men in the same age group is around 59 per cent of men, rising to 69 per cent in rural areas.

HOUSING SCHEMES

The Marriage Fund has set up other schemes to benefit newly married couples. About 325 local families have acquired villas under the Marriage Fund's housing programme that was launched in 1997. Under the scheme, the Fund, in collaboration with approved consulting firms, drew up designs for villas that would be affordable for a wide spectrum of society. These designs are then marketed among local families. Following the selection of a project, the Fund supervises the building of the villas for the family, who arrange finance either by directly investing their own savings or by taking out a bank loan. The Fund

is also responsible for completing formalities, such as obtaining licences from municipalities and other departments. All the designs are accessible on the Internet and initial bookings can also be made online. Nine new designs were launched in 2001. The organisation plans to build villas in Sharjah and Ra's al-Khaimah and offer these to local families at reasonable prices.

Another new service launched in 2001 by the Housing Cooperative project was the opportunity for Marriage Fund beneficiaries to buy their home appliances and furniture, including electronics, at discounted prices.

Much larger than the Marriage Fund housing programme, however, are other housing schemes carried out by the Government (see Infrastructure).

HEALTH

During 2000 the Ministry of Health has continued efforts to improve and modernise its healthcare services by introducing state-of-the-art diagnostic, curative and preventive systems. The implementation of these and other plans have further enhanced the network of health and medical facilities in the country, which have now been acknowledged by the World Health Organisation as being on a par with those of industrialised nations.

HOSPITALS AND PRIMARY HEALTH CARE CENTRES

Infrastructure development has been a fundamental component of the UAE's health strategy. A network of primary health care centres across the country provides basic medical treatment and hospitals, both public and private, have been constructed in every emirate.

The Ministry of Health now manages a total of 30 hospitals, 115 centres for primary health care and nine centres for preventive medicine throughout the United Arab Emirates.

At the end of 2000, Ministry hospitals had a total of 4473 beds, 2350 doctors, 380 dentists and 6250 nursing, ancillary and administrative staff, providing a ratio of 1 doctor for every 1322 of the population and 1 nurse for every 490. Expenditure by Government on healthcare amounted to Dh481 per head during the year 2000.

Both the rapid population growth and the increase in demand for better health services have prompted the Ministry to adopt ambitious plans for the provision of healthcare in the country. With a total of 3.23 million people



visiting the health centres during 2000, equivalent to around one visit by every member of the population, the demand is clearly substantial. There are also a further ten hospitals which are run by the Armed Forces, the police and the oil industry, with an additional 1800 beds.

Plans are under way to increase the bed capacity of Ministry of Health hospitals dramatically within the next ten years, to nearly double the present number. This long-term programme involves an increase to 6700 by 2005 and 8700 by 2010.

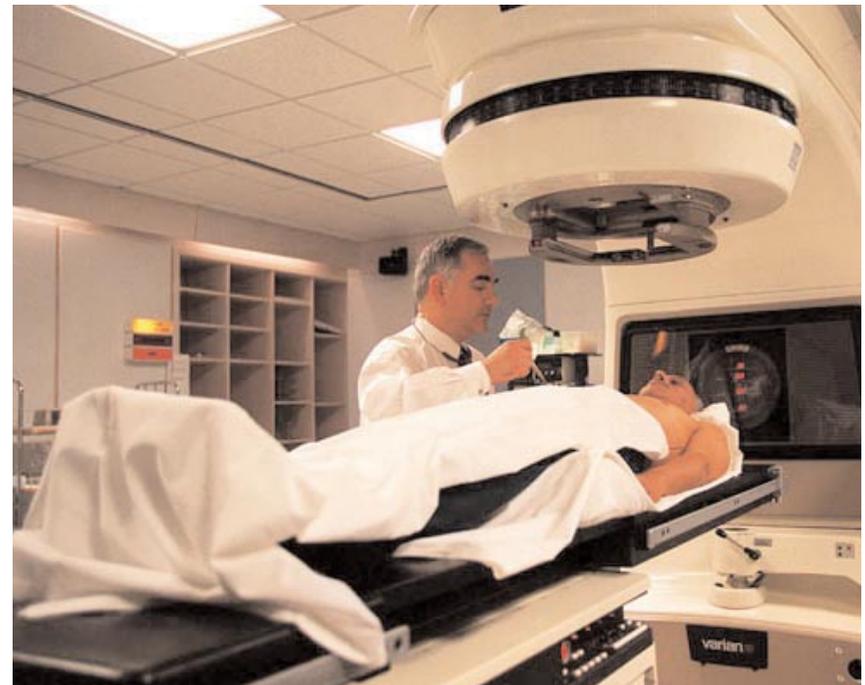
Additional capacity will be made available through the construction of 17 new hospitals throughout the UAE by 2005, as well as the building of extensions to existing hospitals. There is also a plan to establish 25 new primary health care centres during the same period at a cost of Dh100 million. Landmark projects already completed include the Sheikh Khalifa Hospital for surgery and emergency cases in Abu Dhabi, built at a cost of Dh 714 million and operated by the Abu Dhabi Medical Services Corporation; a new 78-bed hospital, costing Dh 87 million opened in Dhaid in early 2001; a general hospital at Medinat Zayed in the Western Region, and the Sheikh Khalifa hospital in Ajman.

The private health sector has also continued to expand over the course of the past year, a reflection of the Government's policy that the private sector should also become involved in healthcare. At the end of 2000, there were 21 private hospitals, with a total of 827 beds, 265 general medical centres, 352 private clinics, and 250 specialist clinics, served by 685 doctors.

SPECIALISED CENTRES

Specialised treatment centres, such as open-heart surgery and transplant units, as well as kidney dialysis units, have been established in the Emirates. The open-heart unit is situated at Al Mafraq Hospital. Al Mafraq is also the site of a telemedicine centre linking the hospital to the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota and enabling the exchange of digitised data and high-resolution, diagnostic video images. The aim is to improve patient care and cut the cost of foreign travel for patients. Other telemedicine programmes are being launched in the United Arab Emirates.

In a bid to improve diagnostic services in radiology departments, the Ministry of Health has launched a project to introduce a tele-radiology service in its hospitals throughout the country. Under the project radiology departments in all the hospitals will be linked through a computer network,



starting with Al Jazeirah and Bida Zayed hospitals in Abu Dhabi and Qasimi and Khor Fakkan hospitals in Sharjah. The installation will gradually be extended to cover all hospitals. The new system will help the Ministry to overcome a shortage of radiologists since radiology technicians will be able to use the new technology to transmit X-ray images to specialists located elsewhere to obtain an early diagnosis.

Among new targets is the further development of these highly specialised services, the improvement of laboratory and diagnostic facilities and the introduction of a series of standards to ensure effective and safe utilisation of services. To assist in achieving these goals, the Ministry has introduced a quality assurance programme that aims to ensure that all medical staff in government institutions have acquired the necessary skills to provide advanced medical services and are committed to quality standards of health services. The programme features a wide range of lectures, conferences, workshops and training courses on skills required to apply quality assurance standards in different health services.

BLOOD TRANSFUSION SERVICE

The Central Laboratories and Blood Banks Department at the Ministry of Health as well as the Abu Dhabi and Sharjah blood banks have received the ISO 9002 certificate, the first blood bank services to be awarded this certificate in the region. A team of experts from the British Standardisation Incorporation (BSI), which grants the ISO certificates, visited the country and reviewed services in the department, as well as blood banks in Abu Dhabi and Sharjah, before granting the certificate.

The Central Blood Banks and Laboratories Department is in the process of setting up a new mobile blood bank unit that commenced operations early in 2002. The new unit, the second in the country, will increase the percentage of total blood donations collected by blood banks to 50 per cent. Prior to that, the single mobile unit in operation was responsible for collecting 25 per cent of the country's total blood donations at present. The Ministry also has plans to purchase a third mobile blood bank in 2003 to assist in collecting 100 per cent of voluntary blood donations by 2005.

In recognition of the high standard of blood transfusion services in the country, the UAE has been chosen as Headquarters for the Arab Cooperation for Blood Transfusion Services. This organisation has been revived after a decade's suspension.

PHARMACIES

The Ministry of Health is also firmly committed to providing access to medicines through an effective system guaranteeing precise standards of all medicines and medical material.

Supervised and licensed by the Pharmaceutical and Medicine Control Department of the Ministry, there are now 713 licensed pharmaceutical institutions in the country, including over 600 private pharmacies and 23 pharmacies in hospitals, as well as 115 medical stores, nine pharmaceutical factories and six scientific offices. The Ministry licensed 88 new institutions in 2001, in addition to 176 pharmacists and 88 assistant pharmacists.

From 1 May 2001, the Ministry of Health ceased the supply of free medication from government owned outpatient clinics to expatriates without a valid health card. Non-national patients with valid health cards will continue to receive free medication and treatment as long as they are hospitalised. The budget saving of 20 per cent created by the ending of free medication for those without valid documents will be used by the Ministry to improve the quality of the healthcare system as a whole.

The Ministry of Health also introduced a new pricing structure for pharmaceutical products on 1 August 2001, cutting the cost of some drugs at private pharmacies by up to 15 per cent. The revised prices concerned imported drugs that have become cheaper due to favourable shifts in currency exchange rates, especially in European countries such as Germany, Switzerland and UK. They include prescription medicines and those available for sale over the counter. However, drugs imported from the US and Canada, where the currency is strong, were not affected.

HEALTH INSURANCE

At present the Government finances 81 per cent of the cost of health care services throughout the country and it is likely to remain the major health provider, but the Ministry is also keen to encourage the private sector to expand in providing health services. The existing private institutions noted above include several projects launched as a result of collaboration between the Ministry and the UAE Offsets Group (UOG). Initially, the UOG is launching the Emirates Health Care Company to provide healthcare management, healthcare investments and consultancy services. Other projects planned include a day surgery centre, sports rehabilitation facility and a diabetes and heart surgery centre.

In addition, as the first step towards a law making it compulsory for employers to provide medical insurance for their employees, new health fees for non-nationals were introduced on 1 May 2001. From that date all expenses for medical treatment provided to expatriates on visit visas became the responsibility of the patient or their sponsors, regardless of the nature of treatment. UAE citizens and expatriate residents with valid health cards issued by the Ministry will continue to receive free treatment.

E-DIRHAM PAYMENTS

As part of its efforts to streamline the healthcare system, the Ministry of Health ceased accepting cash fees for health cards and health fitness certificates at the Revenues Collection Centre at the Abu Dhabi Central Hospital with effect from 27 October 2001. Instead the fees for health cards and certificates can be paid using prepaid e-dirham cards. The new measure is aimed at saving the applicants time and effort in processing cards and certificates. The Ministry of Finance and Industry has authorised a number of banks to sell the card which has a minimum value of Dh100. The first phase of this project's implementation covers Abu Dhabi health zone with machines installed in preventive medicine centres in Abu Dhabi and Mussafah as well as Al Ittihad and Al Rawda primary health care centres. Plans are in place to extend the scheme to all health zones.

The card can also be used for payment of fees for renewal of licences for private health institutions like medical centres, clinics and pharmacies. Meanwhile, the Ministry has started reviewing the mechanisms for issuing health cards and health fitness certificates in order to draw up more flexible and user-friendly procedures.

PREVENTIVE MEDICINE

Preventive medicine has been a key aspect of health care provision. Nine preventive medicine centres across the UAE run campaigns controlling over 36 infectious diseases, fighting epidemics, expanding immunisation programmes, improving maternity and child care, and health education awareness. In addition, the Ministry of Health provides special medical centres for school children, as well as health units in every school.

A highlight in 2001 was certification of the UAE as being free from poliomyelitis, with no cases reported for ten years, thanks to the Ministry's vaccination programme.

A special preventive programme to combat AIDS has been in operation since September 1984. AIDS tests are carried out in 16 laboratories throughout the country with over 5 million tests now having been completed. Substantial progress has also been achieved in the eradication of malaria, thanks to the efforts of a special unit established in 1972 in Sharjah. Malaria now accounts for less than 1 per cent of all cases of disease reported to the Ministry.

During 2001, the Ministry of Health completed the creation of a new programme to protect the country from introduced epidemic diseases such as pulmonary tuberculosis, AIDS, salmonella, intestinal worms, hepatitis (B) and leprosy.

The Health Encyclopaedia CD Rom, launched as a pilot project in Sharjah in 2000 by the Ministry of Health as part of its National Health Education Campaign, has included health awareness information on HIV Aids and Hepatitis B in the new edition released for the 2001–2002 academic year. Other new health themes to be included in the second edition are smoking and chronic ailments like diabetes, hypertension and heart disease.

The information, which is prepared from scientific and verifiable data provided to the Ministry by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Centre for Disease Control (CDC) in the United States, will be presented in a simplified form suitable for young children.

SMOKING AND CANCER

Some 40 per cent of UAE cancer cases are related to smoking, and 70 per cent of these end in death. Hence, the Ministry has submitted a draft anti-smoking law to the Cabinet for their approval. The law includes the following provisions: a national committee will be formed to fight smoking; standards and specifications will be imposed on tobacco products; strict controls will be exercised on tobacco advertisements; tobacco sales to anyone below the age of 18 will be prohibited; tobacco will be heavily taxed to reduce consumption, and smoking will be banned in public places.

The UAE is party to an international treaty signed with WHO on the protection of children against smoking. WHO statistics show that tobacco causes more deaths worldwide than HIV, tuberculosis, childbirth mortality and traffic accidents.

There were 11,800 cancer cases in UAE hospitals between 1980 and 2000. Some 5800 cases were registered at Tawam Hospital in Al Ain, 3000 cases at Al Mafraq Hospital, and 3000 cases at Dibba Hospital. Seventy-six men out

of every 100,000 suffer from cancer, while 71 women out of every 100,000 are cancer patients. These figures are better than those from other developed countries, such as the US where 374 out of every 100,000 people suffer from cancer, 327 in Japan, and 261 in the UK.

The Ministry has constructed three specialised centres for cancer treatment – at Tawam, Al Mafraq and Sheikh Khalifa hospitals. These centres, which can accommodate 200 patients, were provided in 2000 with 260 staff: 100 surgeons, 30 X-ray diagnosis specialists, 11 chemical treatment specialists, eight blood cancer experts, eight doctors specialising in nuclear medicine, seven child cancer specialists, six cancer specialists in the field of obstetrics, 20 laboratory experts, 10 physiotherapists, 20 X-ray treatment specialists, and 40 nurses. The annual cost of providing cancer treatment was Dh100 million. The Ministry has spent Dh50 million setting up the cancer centre at Tawam Hospital. Some Dh15 million has been spent to modernise the cancer centre at Al Mafraq Hospital, and Dh2 million to develop the cancer centre at Tawam Hospital.

ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE

In accordance with ministerial decree No. 600 for the year 2001, the Ministry of Health has announced that the practice of alternative medicine through licensed practitioners will be permitted in the UAE. The decree covers homeopathy, chiropractic, ayurveda, unani herbal healing, traditional Chinese medicine, traditional herbal medicine and osteopathy. An office of Complementary and Alternative Medicine (OCAM) was also set up at the Ministry of Health under the auspices of the decree. OCAM will oversee the setting of examinations for practitioners of alternative medicine and the granting of licences.

Applicants should hold a degree in alternative medicine. Persons holding a post-graduate diploma or certificate after completing a two-year course in any branch of alternative medicine are also eligible for the examinations. Allied health specialists and graduates from the Health Ministry such as nurses, dieticians and nutritionists, occupational therapists and physiotherapists, who have completed a three-year course in any branch of alternative medicine from recognised institutions, will be considered on an individual basis.