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The Unified Medical Dictionary Progress achieved and future prospects

The Unified Medical Dictionary (UMD) is an important tool that will end the painful fact of duality of language used by health professionals to communicate with their families, friends and fellow citizens. It is the result of collaboration between several scholars, institutions, organizations and partners and has also allowed several Arabic books to be published in a friendly and acceptable form.

In fact, talking about the UMD is a direct and vital narration of a long story of success that deserves contemplation and consideration. This story involved steady progress, keeping up with scientific and technological advances to enrich the UMD with existing and new terms and develop it from a bilingual hard-copy dictionary (English-Arabic) into a multi-lingual electronic dictionary (Arabic-English-French-Spanish-German-Farsi) available in various forms: CD, website, hard copy, and annotated. Several specialized dictionaries have also been isolated from the mother dictionary, covering the following areas: dentistry, pharmacy, anatomy, eye, genetics, molecular biology, neurology, epidemiology, nursing, as well as a concise medical dictionary for medical students, doctors, allied health professionals and other health workers.

The journey began in 1966. Following an initiative by its Assistant Secretary-General, Dr Ezzat Mostafa, the Arab Medical Union formed a committee of professors from established medical faculties, proficient in both medicine and language, to unify the medical terms. The committee held several meetings in Cairo, Baghdad, Mosul, Damascus and Lebanon. The newborn dictionary was printed several times, the first by the Iraqi Arabic Academy in 1973. It was reprinted in Cairo in 1977. The second edition was printed by Mosul University Press, Iraq, in 1978. This was followed by the fourth revised edition, was printed by Medlevant AG press in Switzerland in 1983. Several electronic versions were distributed over a decade among users before the fourth edition was published this year in its final form. It is planned to produce more electronic versions, each involving more terms, more languages, and more programming functions.

Several scholars have attended to the UMD over the years. The first committee formed by the Arab Medical Union included Dr Mahmoud Al-Jalily, Dr Abdullatif Al-Badry, the late Dr Ahmad Abdul-Sattar Al-Jouary (from Iraq), the late Dr Mohammad Ahmad Soliman (from Egypt), the late Dr Hosny Sabah and Dr Haytham Al-Khayat (from the Syrian Arab Republic). Later, the Arab Medical Union assigned to the World Health Organization, represented in the Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, the task of following up the work on the UMD. An Action Committee on Arabic medical terms was formed, which included, in addition to the above members, the late Dr Jamil Anouti (from Lebanon), Dr Saied Shaiban (from Algiers), Dr Alseddiq Al-Jeddi (from Tunisia) and Dr Adel Hussein Lotfi (from Egypt). Following the publishing of the third edition, the work on the UMD was continued by the WHO Arabic Programme, supervised by its Director Dr Haytham Al-Khayat. Several professors and specialists contributed in this task, especially the late Dr Sadek Helali and Dr Kassem Sara, who played a crucial role in this wide expansion of the terms of the UMD.

The number and wording of terms have developed progressively. From an initial number of several thousands, the number of terms in the UMD has now reached more than 150 000. The wording, initially based on personal views, is now based on a strict and clear methodology. Also, working on the UMD has produced a textbook on medical terminology for medical students, and led to the establishment of a network linking those interested in the arabization of health and medical sciences (www.ahsn.emro.who.int).

As regards the recent situation of the UMD, it is now available in an electronic version of a highly-developed programme allowing advanced search for terms and their equivalents in Arabic, English and French, along with illustrations and morphological search. There is also another version allowing search in Arabic, English, French, Spanish and German, along with annotations in Arabic.

As far as the paper version is concerned, the mother UMD is now available (English-Arabic), along with several specialized dictionaries that have been extracted from the mother dictionary, including: the Unified Dictionary of Dentistry (English-Arabic and Arabic-English), the Unified Dictionary of Pharmacy (English-Arabic), and the Unified Dictionary of Anatomy. Searching of the UMD terms is also available now on the Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean website.

Any reader of articles on health or medical education will notice, easily, the role of the UMD in unifying the language of communication in all Arab countries. This is surely a result of the continuous efforts of those who have dedicated themselves to the UMD, encouraged users of its terms to give their feedback about terms, received this feedback, met the needs of users, adopted terms acceptable to users, and changed those that are unacceptable. The dialogue and efforts continue to adopt terms that are acceptable to users.

As regard future perspectives, we all look forward to reaching absolute consensus in all Arabic countries on every term and concept. Though it may seem difficult, at least now, we should at least increase the level of agreement on such terms and concepts, and minimize the level of disagreement. This may only be achieved through the promotion of communication between those working for the UMD and those using it on a daily basis, such as doctors, health workers, teachers, and health service customers. Surely, today's communication media are capable of reaching this goal. We also aspire to introduce Arabic terms in international classification and nomenclature of diseases, electronic registers applications, library classification, Medical Subject Headings, thesaurus, multi-lingual search, and machine translation memory. Such efforts have started to bear fruit: the WHO Arabic Programme, a global WHO programme hosted by the Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, has established cooperation links with international organizations of standardization and libraries to add Arabic to other languages used in data entry and retrieval.

The lesson that we may learn from the journey of the UMD is that dedication and devotion to a clear goal will surely bear good fruit. Also, the journey of the UMD has been a good example of Arab unity, with several scholars from all Arab countries dedicating themselves to its development, several Arab capitals and cities hosting their meetings, and successive generations contributing in such a fruitful project. Surely, such factors are needed to ensure success and sustainability of many of our ongoing projects.