

branching out

BY PAUL ZAKRZEWSKI

Weill Cornell plans for the Qatar partnership move forward

fOR NEARLY A YEAR DR. DANIEL ALONSO HAS BEEN CAUGHT BETWEEN two time zones. At his offices at the Weill Cornell Medical College in New York, Alonso frequently consults a watch he purchased on one of seven recent trips to the emirate of Qatar. Its two tiny dials are set eight hours apart (seven during Daylight Saving Time), simultaneously giving the time in Manhattan and in Doha, the capital of Qatar, 6,700 miles away. His work schedule has shifted, too. He corresponds with colleagues in Qatar early each morning from Saturday through Wednesday, and attends to other business on Thursdays and Fridays, the weekend in Muslim countries. Alonso is dean of the medical college's branch in the Persian Gulf (also known as the Arabian Gulf)—one of the most ambitious partnerships in international education ever undertaken by an American university.

Before the partnership with Qatar was announced in April 2001, making headlines in the *New York Times*, few in the Cornell community had heard of the tiny emirate. Jutting like a thumb from the west coast of the Arabian Gulf, it is only 5,000 square miles in area, about the size of Connecticut. For much of its history, the country struggled with strife and poverty. But by the early 1970s, gas prices were soaring and Qatar had declared its independence from Britain; the country was well on its way to building one of the world's great welfare states. Today, its 600,000 residents take in nearly \$4 billion a year from oil and natural gas exports. "Al Doha" means growth, a fitting name for a city that has become a hub for business and politics in the Middle East. The Arab-language news network, Al Jazeera, is headquartered there, and the city recently beat out Hong Kong and Kuala Lumpur for the privilege of hosting the 2006 Asian Games. In November 2001, Doha hosted the World Trade Organization meetings.



CHRISTINE OSBORNE / CORBIS

Capital city: Doha, home to the new branch of Weill Cornell, on the Arabian Gulf

Beginning with a class of fifty medical students in 2004, the Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar will offer a similar curriculum and experience to the one found in New York, resulting in a Cornell MD degree. The project is budgeted at \$750 million over its first ten years (not including construction). The full sum will be paid by the Qatar Foundation for Education, Science, and Community Development, a private nonprofit organization created by Qatar's emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, and run by his wife, Sheikha Mozah bint Nasser Al-Misnad. "Establishing a Qatar branch of Weill Cornell is an unprecedented example of the strength of American education," President Hunter Rawlings said in his formal announcement of the partnership. "It reflects the common commitment to educational opportunity that links all nations and peoples."

Cornell is the first American university to offer its medical degree in a foreign country, and the branch will be Qatar's first co-ed professional school. In May 2000, Alonso and Dr. Antonio Gotto, dean of the medical college, negotiated the terms of the partnership. The details were hammered out over the next eight months, with final agreement reached in January 2001. The fundamentals both sides agreed to included policies on academic freedom, human rights, acceptance of women students, need-blind admission, and co-ed classes. "We kept saying the only way we can create this branch is if it is subject to all of Cornell's principles and standards," says Alonso. "And they kept saying, 'No problem,' to our requirements. What they wanted from us was our commitment, our curriculum, our faculty, and the promise that Cornell would be the degree-granting institution."

The project has come under close scrutiny over the past year. Some Cornell faculty and students, primarily in Ithaca, have voiced concerns about everything from academic freedom to safety—heightened by last fall's terrorist attacks and the war in Afghanistan. But university officials stress that the agreement with the Qatar Foundation gives Cornell full autonomy, and while they are exercising caution, the project is moving ahead, with unanimous support

from Weill Cornell's department chairs. "We believe the basic reasons for doing this—to contribute to the education, research, and clinical care of people in Qatar and the Gulf region—are still valid," says Gotto, "and the project is moving forward."

With the branch proceeding on schedule, the first medical college representatives will move to Doha this February. Havva Idriss, vice dean for administration, will oversee branch operations. Idriss is the newest member of the senior team, having joined the project last August after six years with the NewYork-Presbyterian Healthcare System. Idriss, who was born in Turkey, says she feels a close kinship to the culture. "Even if I didn't," she says, "the project is so forward-looking I would have wanted the privilege of being involved." She has already begun to recruit staff for human resources, information technologies, finance, faculty affairs, and other offices.

Associate Dean Dr. David Robertshaw, who is heading up the two-year premedical program, will also move in February.

Construction plans are moving forward, as well. Last fall Japanese architects hired by the Qatar Foundation submitted a schematic design for the 360,000-square-foot educational and research facility. Cornell must approve all design plans as part of the agreement, and officials expect construction to begin as early as this winter and finish by summer 2003.

bEGINNING THIS FALL WITH THE FIRST premedical class, the branch will roll out one year of study annually, until it graduates its first medical class in 2008. The first two years will consist of premedical science courses ranging from biology and physics to immunology and biochemistry. The medical science curriculum will be taught in the next two years, while hands-on training will consist of an introduction to clinical coursework followed by the traditional hospital clerkship rotations in principal clinical disciplines and final-year elective courses. The entire program is six years long; the premedical and medical components will be considered part of one program, even though each will require a separate admissions process.

"This is the most exciting challenge I've had in my entire career," says Alonso. "How many people get a chance to start a medical school from scratch?" Not only will the pathologist be involved in building much of the



Dean Daniel Alonso

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project from the ground up; he'll also draw on more than two decades of experience at 1300 York Avenue. In the mid-Nineties, Alonso oversaw a curriculum overhaul at the medical school. Traditional practice called for two years of science, followed by two years of clinical experience. The new approach integrates basic and clinical sciences, emphasizes problem-based learning combined with small group work, and includes clinical preceptorships and courses in primary care and doctoring. It is this updated curriculum that Alonso intends to use for the new Qatar branch.

Qatari applicants will be required to match their American counterparts' qualifications. Between sixty and seventy students in this year's academic bridge program, being run by a group of Texas-based universities, have declared their intent to apply for admission to the premedical program. The college plans to closely monitor the results of their studies, which include thirty-three weeks of daily intensive English classes, along with training in science and help with study and computer skills. "Those students will be taking SATs every quarter, and we'll know how they're doing by their TOEFLs and SATs," says Alonso. "We will accept only those students who meet Cornell requirements."

Prior to the Cornell partnership, Qatar lacked a medical school, and residents had to travel abroad for medical training. The country's major healthcare system, the Hamad Medical Corporation, is run by the government, which provides free care to all Qataris. With headquarters in Doha, the system includes the 900-bed Hamad General Hospital, along with a network of other hospitals and twenty-four primary care clinics. According to the partnership agreement, 70 percent of each medical class must be Qatari citizens, provided they meet Cornell's admission requirements. Nonetheless, the branch will be open to students from around the world; potential applicants could include children of expatriates living in Qatar, along with students from nearby Arabian Gulf countries, Israel, and other nations.

Clinical education requires access to patients and hospital beds. For now, students will depend on the Hamad General Hospital for their experience. Plans call for the construction of a specialized hospital next to the medical school facility, though officials stress no decisions have been made. Alonso says he hopes the hospital will open in 2006, to coincide with the program's first year of clinical education (and the third year of medical school).

As the program becomes more established, it also plans to offer significant research opportunities. Senior Associate Dean for Research at Weill Cornell in New York Lisa Staiano-Coico says that an important area of research will focus on genetics. "There are a number of genetically linked diseases such as diabetes and heart disease that are prevalent in Qatar," she says. "We may be carrying out studies to examine the genetic components of these diseases among the indigenous population."

Some have questioned whether the branch can deliver training comparable to the Weill Medical College in New York. Alonso

points out that the partnership gives Weill Cornell complete control over the academic program. By limiting enrollment and enhancing patient interactions, he says, the branch can offer high-quality training. "Medical education in the United States is so successful because of student interaction with patients from the beginning of school," says Alonso. "Many foreign medical schools enroll hundreds of students per class, while we will limit admissions in order to match students to clinical resources."

The new branch will supplement the locally delivered curriculum with distance-learning opportunities. A high-speed, dedicated link between New York and Doha will provide Internet access and videoconferencing. Plans call for some lectures to be taped in New York and video streamed to classes in Doha, with instructors available to answer questions after each presentation. Each student will be given a laptop computer for network access in classrooms and elsewhere in the building, by way of a wireless network.

In 2003, the Qatar branch will encounter one of its first major tests. The entire medical college—both campuses—is up for accreditation, which occurs every seven years and is preceded by a two-year preliminary study. Officials are in close touch with the Liaison Committee on Medical Education (LCME), the accrediting body for American medical schools. Alonso says everyone expects accreditation of the new branch to go smoothly. "The closer the branch in Qatar resembles the experience, the credentials, the principles, the policies, and the standards of the Weill Cornell Medical College in New York," he says, "the more likely we'll be to get accreditation."

IN MANY WAYS, THE IDEA FOR A MAJOR INTERNATIONAL collaboration dates back to 1997, when Dr. Gotto became dean of the medical college. Gotto, who arrived from Houston with a keen interest in international medicine, quickly established the Office of International Health Care. He also brought with him a number of successful foreign initiatives, including programs in Turkey and Argentina. In addition to programs at the American Hospital in Paris and in Salzburg, the medical college is also supporting a new medical school in northern Tanzania scheduled to open this year. Weill Cornell will provide the Tanzanian school with computers, textbooks, curriculum guidance, and training of prospective faculty. But Weill Cornell does not operate any of these projects, and none is comparable to the Qatar branch in size or scope. "This is a very ambitious step that declares us a major player in international medicine," says Gotto.

In the last decade, Qatar has been gaining status on the world's political map. The present leader, Sheikh Hamad, who became emir in 1995, has initiated an era of unprecedented freedoms for the country. He has ordered the creation of a constitution, and

plans for an elected parliament should be realized in the next two years. The government has signed defense agreements with the U.S., Britain, and France; it also chairs the fifty-six-nation Organization of the Islamic Conference.

One of Sheikh Hamad's most highly publicized reforms was the creation of the Qatar Foundation, which set up new educational opportunities for the country. In 1997 the Foundation began planning the 360-acre campus it has dubbed "Education City," on Doha's outskirts. The campus is expected to attract several undergraduate, graduate, and research facilities; hopes are that many will be branch campuses of top universities from around the world.

Already, the Qatar Foundation has signed up Virginia Commonwealth University, which established the School of Design Arts four years ago. A planned partnership with the University of North Carolina will establish both an undergraduate baccalaureate program and a school of business. The foundation is also reportedly looking for a school of engineering and a school of computer science, among others.

It was a meeting between two U.S. congresswomen and the emir's wife that set the wheels of the Cornell partnership in motion. In spring 1999, congresswomen Sue Kelly and Carolyn Maloney observed the country's first municipal elections, also the first time women could vote and run for office. Through Sheikha Mozah, the pair learned about the country's educational goals, and in particular the need for a medical college. Upon her return, Kelly contacted Gotto. "There was a merger of two forces in making this happen," says Alonso. "You have a country that needed a medical school and had the resources to fund it, and a medical school dean who had a tremendous vision in international medicine and expanding Cornell's horizons."

And while Education City plans are proceeding, it's the Cornell partnership that has highlighted the foundation's plans. "They want quality," says Alonso. "They want the American model and they're willing to provide the financial support to achieve it." He compares the medical college to a fancy superstore that attracts shoppers to a mall. "We're the anchoring store."

The emir's underwriting of the project doesn't sit well with some members of the Cornell community, who charge that the partnership is financially motivated. Gotto says the primary motive for the new branch is medical and educational, not financial. Nonetheless, the foundation's money was essential to the project to eliminate Cornell's financial risk. "We had to have assurance that there would be no financial risk to Cornell or the medical school with this program," he says. "To the extent that the financial arrangements allowed us to be certain of this, then the entire contribution entered into our decision." (Aside from the \$750 million in funding, the emir's support includes an undisclosed gift to the medical college. Officials say this was not a condition for proceeding with the deal, though the sum has not been publicly disclosed.)

Some Cornell University faculty fear that the branch's funding may compromise academic independence. The medical college maintains that a single source of funding will make operating the new branch easier, and the agreement guarantees academic freedom. "Through this agreement, Cornell has absolute and total control over hiring of the faculty, hiring of the staff, selection of the students, awarding of the degrees, and the nature of the curriculum," says Gotto. "We're not concerned that the funding comes from only the Qatar Foundation."



Sheikh Hamad: The founder of the Qatar Foundation and sponsor of Weill Cornell's newest branch visited New York in October.

Although Qatar has remained relatively calm in the wake of last fall's terrorist attacks, officials are reviewing security concerns. "We know this is a volatile part of the world," says Gotto, "so we had already discussed it extensively." The university and the medical college have been in ongoing consultation with senior officials at the U.S. State Department and other government agencies, all of whom have encouraged Cornell to go forward with the initiative.

The college hired an international security firm soon after the partnership was announced, to establish safety requirements. The Qatar Foundation will be primarily responsible for security: among other measures, there will be a fence around the entire campus and an authorized-access verification system at each entrance to the medical school building. At the same time, says Alonso, it's important to strike a balance. "We want to install features that give faculty and students a feeling of safety, but don't affect the quality of scholarly activities."

Sheikh Hamad helped assuage fears during an October visit to New York. Extending his condolences on behalf of the state of Qatar, the emir reiterated his country's stand against terrorism and reaffirmed the plans to establish the medical college. He ended his visit by donating \$1 million to the burn unit at the New York Weill Cornell Medical Center, which treated twenty-two victims of the World Trade Center disaster.

Cornell is carefully watching international developments and staying in close touch with other universities also active in the area, including Virginia Commonwealth University. Yet administrators

involved in the project say its educational mission is more important now than ever. "It's one thing to attempt to communicate on the level of state and government, but another to develop initiatives and programs that can bring enduring value to the people themselves," says Idriss. "We all recognize that there's been some degree of disconnection with this part of the world, and I think it's in the interest of everyone concerned that we establish these

connections with individuals."

Alonso, who leaves for Qatar in April, concurs. "We're going to have the opportunity to influence existing hospitals, and medical education will ultimately improve health care," he says. "I don't think it's a question of us going in and profiting from this country's resources. We will be training doctors. I don't think there are too many other missions more important than that." ●



RUNNING THE FIRST medical college on the block is a great opportunity for Cornell, but there's at least one challenge: not all of the prospective applicants to Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar presently have the necessary academic training. To help them bring their credentials up to snuff, a two-year program run by the college will cover premedical science, while an academic bridge program run by the Texas International Education Consortium will offer English language classes and study skills. The medical college has tapped Associate Dean Dr. David Robertshaw to oversee all aspects of the four-semester premedical program.

Robertshaw, who until recently served as director of the College of Veterinary Medicine's international program, has been actively recruiting instructors for the program since last fall. "Most will be current Cornell faculty members," says Robertshaw, "and if we don't get them all from Cornell, then we'll appoint individuals who qualify for Cornell faculty appointments." The premedical program will eventually hire nineteen professors in all. "We think that's a reasonable number for a two-year course, but we don't plan to hire them all at once," he says. "We're going to build up to that number [over two years]."

Despite weekly visits to the Weill Medical College in New York, Robertshaw will remain in Ithaca until his departure for Qatar in February. (Robertshaw is fortunate: according to guide books, the best time of year in Qatar is between late February and early March because the heat is fierce in the summer, and sandstorms are common in spring and winter.)

The curriculum of basic science classes is aimed at preparing students for the rigors of medical training. Although students will be required to seek separate admission to the four-year medical program, the entire six-year course of study is integrated. Students will learn chemistry (both general and organic), biology, physics, immunology, genetics, and biochem-

Getting off the ground

A bridge program readies applicants for medical school.

istry, among other subjects. Says Robertshaw: "These courses are virtually identical to those taught in Ithaca."

Meanwhile, math classes will focus on the statistical analysis necessary to interpret data in a laboratory. The program will also incorporate the problem-based approach to instruction and provide research opportunities to further enrich the medical school experience. "It's not a degree program, but it will result in undergraduate credits and a transcript from Cornell University," says Robertshaw. "Those students who

are not able to get into the medical program still leave with an official transcript."

It's precisely this element of the program that has some university faculty worried. "Students are getting an Ithaca transcript—identical to the one students get here—and one that's transferable to any university in the United States. This makes us responsible for the quality of the education," says Professor J. Robert Cooke, dean of the faculty in Ithaca. The engineer adds that it's difficult for university faculty to monitor the premedical program at such a distance. "The process [of developing courses] is not the same as the one we have here. The syllabus might be the same, but will the quality of every person using the syllabus be the same?" But Robertshaw isn't concerned. "There are no new courses being created for this particular program," he says. "These are existing courses, taught by existing faculty who have taught these classes already, or we are recruiting people who are able to teach these classes with Cornell standards."

Moreover, the premedical classes fit into the larger educational mission of the Qatar branch. "By its nature, this is something different," says Robertshaw. "We are extending our university to another part of the world. People will experience American education—and American culture—while we experience theirs. This enterprise might help to break down barriers that now exist between the two."