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Health and Wellness Portfolio Committee's International Study Tour to Qatar (Doha)



Exploring Global Best Practices in Digital Health and Electronic Patient Records

Touchdown in Doha: Diplomacy, Dress Codes and Digital Dreams

After a long journey that tested everyone's stamina and luggage limits, the Health and Wellness Portfolio Committee of the Gauteng Provincial Legislature landed in Doha, Qatar, for a week-long benchmarking study tour.

The purpose: to learn from Qatar's world-leading experience in electronic health records (EHRs) and digital health transformation, as South Africa takes its own bold steps towards digitising patient records in public hospitals.

The first day set the tone for the visit. The Committee met with South Africa's Ambassador to Qatar, His Excellency Ghulam Hoosein Asmal, who offered valuable context about Qatar's health landscape and shared insights into the country's success in managing non-communicable diseases such as diabetes and hypertension, issues that mirror South Africa's own public-health challenges.

He highlighted how Qatar embeds health literacy from early childhood education and how its fully digitised health system enables quick access, accurate records, and seamless coordination among care providers. These practices resonated strongly with the Committee's oversight focus, as Gauteng's Department of Health and Wellness recently launched a province-wide digitisation drive aimed at converting over 800 million patient records within 36 months.

This initiative, already under way at Chris Hani Baragwanath Academic Hospital and Rahima Moosa Mother and Child Hospital, is central to improving service efficiency, reducing errors, and preparing the province for the implementation of the National Health Insurance (NHI) system.

Cultural Lessons in Context

Doha offered its first cultural lesson sooner than expected. Qatar is a country that prizes modesty and decorum principles reflected in everything from public behaviour to professional attire. During the first meeting with the Ministry of Public Health, one delegate almost missed entry because her dress, while entirely respectable by South African standards, didn't meet local length requirements.

This sparked what has since become the delegation's morning dress-code check-in, a light-hearted ritual led by the Chairperson Letsoalo to ensure everyone remains compliant. The experience offered a humorous reminder that in global engagements, understanding context, whether cultural or clinical is key to effective cooperation.

A spontaneous shopping trip through Doha's pristine malls followed, where the delegates marvelled at the futuristic designed buildings and spotless streets, clear signs of a nation that values order and presentation in every sphere of life, including governance.

Inside Qatar's Health Strategy: Focus, Discipline and Delivery

The Committee's official programme began at the Qatari Ministry of Public Health (there are no photos due to understanding context) where senior officials outlined their National Health Strategy 2024–2030. The strategy aligns directly with the country's broader Vision 2030, which places human development and wellbeing at the centre of national progress.

Unlike traditional strategies that attempt to cover every issue at once, Qatar's current plan narrows its priorities to four flagship areas, ensuring clarity, accountability, and measurable results. This focused approach, supported by strong government direction during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, has helped maintain public confidence and high standards of care.

The results speak for themselves: Qatar's life expectancy sits at 83 years, compared to 66 years in South Africa, a difference that reflects not just wealth, but the efficiency of implementation.

A Build Up to a Connected Health System: The Power of Data

Qatar's National Health Exchange Hub is a digital platform links that public, private, and semi-private health facilities, allowing authorised providers to access patient records, referrals, and e-prescriptions in real time.

The system is complemented by a **public Super App**, through which citizens can book appointments, consult doctors online, and access vaccination histories at the tap of a screen. Together, these tools illustrate what is possible when health data systems are fully integrated and patient centred. **Qatar's digital-transformation framework is built around three core outcomes:**

1. **Digital transformation of clinical and shared services**
2. **Data enablement and management**
3. **Integration of artificial intelligence (AI)**

The guiding principle is simple but profound: eliminate duplication, integrate systems, and improve accessibility.



A Visit to Sidra Hospital: Where Innovation Meets Compassion
No trip to Doha’s health facilities would be complete without a visit to Sidra Medicine, Qatar’s world-class women’s and children’s hospital and a shining example of how public–private partnerships (PPPs) can work in harmony.

Opened in 2018, Sidra stands as a futuristic glass structure that looks more like a luxury hotel than a hospital. But once inside, it’s clear that its beauty is matched by purpose. The Committee was warmly received by Sidra’s senior management team, a true multicultural mix of professionals drawn from across the globe. Sidra is completely digitalised, every process, from admissions to discharge, happens within an interconnected electronic system. The hospital represents a decade of digital planning and implementation, making it one of the most advanced healthcare facilities in the region.



A Hybrid Model for Public Benefit

What fascinated the delegation most was Sidra’s operational model. Although structured as a private hospital, Sidra provides public services, especially in paediatrics, and is partly funded through the public purse. This hybrid approach allows Qatar to deliver cutting-edge care to its citizens while leveraging private-sector efficiency and innovation. It’s a model worth studying as South Africa continues to shape its public–private partnerships under the NHI framework. Sidra demonstrates how partnership doesn’t have to mean privatisation, it can mean collaboration for shared benefit, where government ensures access and equity while the private sector brings agility and technology.

Centres of Excellence: Education, Research, and Women’s Health

Sidra is more than a hospital, it’s a living classroom and research powerhouse. Beyond treating patients, it trains the next generation of health professionals through strong residency programmes in paediatrics and women’s health, ensuring a steady pipeline of skilled clinicians who blend compassion with cutting-edge knowledge. What stood out most was Sidra’s philosophy: women’s health is treated as an ecosystem not just a clinic, but a conversation. Every aspect of care, from reproductive health to mental wellness, nutrition, and chronic disease management, is designed to support women holistically, at every stage of life.

Paediatric Care Reimagined

Sidra also serves as a paediatric tertiary hospital, caring for patients up to the age of 18. With a 200-bed capacity and every imaginable paediatric speciality under one roof, the facility represents what true convergence in healthcare looks like. For the delegation, this was an eye-opener. In South Africa, paediatric services are often scattered across facilities and departments, creating logistical and clinical inefficiencies. Sidra’s integrated model where everything from oncology to mental health sits within a unified care framework exemplifies how design and digitalisation can transform the patient experience.

Towards One Digital Vision

Across Qatar’s health system, hospitals like Sidra use interconnected platforms that securely store and share patient data. The country is steadily moving toward its Vision 2030 goal, a fully unified, 100% digitalised national health system that links every citizen’s medical journey, from birth to adulthood, across all facilities.

For Gauteng, this offers a compelling example: digitisation is not an isolated project but an evolving ecosystem that thrives on consistency, collaboration, and clear governance.

**Reflections:
Lessons from Doha**

Two days into the study tour, the delegation gained more than technical insight it has witnessed the value of discipline, coordination, and clear strategic focus.

From the Ministry’s precision to Sidra’s seamless innovation, one message rings clear: the future of healthcare lies in integration — not fragmentation.

Coming Up Next

From digital dashboards to desert diplomacy, the journey is only getting started. Stay tuned for the upcoming days, where the Committee goes beyond the boardroom — exploring how Qatar’s innovation culture translates into patient care, people power, and policy in motion. **Because if Days 1 and 2 were the trailer, what’s next might just be the main feature.**