

JOURNEY INTO THE UNKNOWN



When Diabetes UK Community Champion, Abdul Rais, appeared on TV to talk about his experience of Type 2, little did he know it would take him to Pakistan and Dubai to raise awareness of the condition and the work of the charity. Here, he explains more...

Back in May 2015, I was asked to talk about my experience of Type 2 diabetes on an Islam Channel programme called *Living the Life*. The programme explored a range of interesting topical issues around the Muslim Community. As a media volunteer for Diabetes UK, as well as a Community Champion in my local area, it's not unusual for me to be contacted by the media, or by various groups or organisations, to talk about diabetes from time to time. It's something I really enjoy doing as it gives me a chance to talk about diabetes and to promote the work that Diabetes UK does for people with the condition.

As I sat in the studio, little did I know that my TV appearance would one day take me across the world to raise awareness of diabetes in Pakistan and Dubai, and to see how people with both Type 1 and Type 2 manage the condition in these countries.

But, that's exactly what happened when a former colleague, Dr Amjad Ali, happened to catch my TV appearance and got in touch.

I hadn't been in contact with 'Dr Amjad', as he's known to his colleagues, for some 15 years. He's a surgeon by profession. We used to volunteer together for a charity. But, when he left, we lost touch. However, he managed to trace me through friends of friends even though it took him almost a year to do so. We spoke over the phone and subsequently met a week later to catch up. I told him about my activities as a Diabetes UK Community Champion and he told me about his charity work.

It was June 2016 and Ramadan was about to start around the middle of the month, so he invited me to give a talk on Ramadan and diabetes at a gathering that he'd organised in a hall in Bedford for the

community. When it was over, Dr Amjad introduced me to some members of the audience. They were all doctors. The talk was part of a fundraising event for a registered charity hospital called Abaseen Institute of Medical Science (AIMS), situated in the city of Peshawar in northern Pakistan. This charity is dedicated to helping people in that region who have diabetes. This event had been organised by the UK wing of AIMS, as it's a registered charity in the UK. Funds raised here support AIMS in Pakistan.

Dr Amjad explained that he supported AIMS together with other medical and non-medical professionals and that the hospital in Peshawar is the one place where they'd never turn a patient away purely on the basis that they couldn't afford to pay for treatment. This was a really

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encouraging to hear. We know that diabetes is on the increase and that Type 2 – is taking the Middle East and South East Asia like a storm. So, I was particularly interested in finding out more about AIMS. The hospital wasn't just a place where people with diabetes received medication or treatment. In fact, it also provides other medical services, including dental treatment, cardiology and ophthalmology services but this particular wing is dedicated to diabetes. I was impressed!

Uncharted territory

Dr Amjad asked me if I'd be interested in travelling to Pakistan to attend a conference on diabetes in March 2017, organised by AIMS, and to give a talk to patients and medical staff. AIMS would be willing to pay all the expenses. I felt honoured, but reluctant to travel considering the volatile situation in Pakistan. To assure me, Dr Amjad agreed to travel with me. I was excited at the thought of delivering a talk abroad to raise awareness of diabetes, but a bit nervous at the same time. In the end, after discussing it with Diabetes UK, I agreed to go. He introduced me to the President of AIMS, Dr Zia Ul Hasan, via email, so that we could finalise the schedule.

Dr Zia lives in Dubai, where he runs his own private surgery and also works for International Modern Hospital (IMH). He's also the President of Pakistan Association, an organisation set up for the Pakistani community living in Dubai. At the Medical Wing of Pakistan Association, he's been holding free monthly medical camps since 2008 for patients with diabetes who are at risk of cardiovascular disease, as well as other complications associated with the condition. They've now secured permission from the Dubai authorities to set up a non-profit-making medical centre for the low paid workers from all communities who work in Dubai and can't afford to pay for their medical treatment for chronic conditions, such as diabetes.

Taking on the challenge

It was now December 2016, and with just three months to go to my trip, Dr Zia asked me to write a book in Urdu on diabetes from a patient's perspective. He also wanted me to deliver a presentation on diabetes in Urdu at the conference. The book was to be launched at the conference – so I had to get cracking as

DIABETES IN NUMBERS

- **Over 1 million: The number of cases of diabetes in adults in the United Arab Emirates in 2015.**
- **Over 7 million: The number of cases of diabetes in adults in Pakistan in 2015.**



The city of Peshawar

It was going to be a long fight with a stopover at Dubai airport for three hours! When we landed in the city in the early hours of the following morning, I'd been travelling for about 20 hours. I was very tired but also very excited at the thought of what would lie ahead.

Early next morning, I was driven to AIMS hospital. As I came out of the vehicle, I was a bit confused and bemused at



Abdul giving his speech at the conference

the conference was due to take place in March of this year.

As part of the trip, I was also to deliver another talk in Dubai at the International Modern Hospital (IMH) where Dr Zia is a specialist in endocrinology. It was going to be a hectic schedule spread over four days – two days in each of the two countries.

I was well aware that this was going to be a real challenge in more ways than one. I'd never been to either of the two places before; there'd be immense jet lag; I wouldn't be able to have much rest in between; the weather in both countries would probably be difficult to bear. But, I also knew that this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for me to help raise awareness of diabetes in both countries. It was an honour, although I was conscious of the fact that it would be a journey into uncharted territory for me.

Time to talk

Finally, it was time for me to set out on my journey to Peshawar. Dr Amjad and I boarded a plane on Tuesday, 21 March.

the same time to see a large sign that read *AIMS Sugar Hospital*. Dr Zia, who'd travelled from Dubai, welcomed me at the gate. I was curious about the name of the hospital – Dr Zia explained that in Pakistan diabetes is known as 'the sugar disease', hence the name. The name *AIMS Diabetes*

Centre was displayed on another board.

As I entered the hospital building, Dr Zia suggested that as I had a couple of hours before the start of the conference, he'd like me to take a tour of the hospital to see how the

patients are registered and treated. At Reception, I was asked for my details. The hospital doesn't charge the patients a fee, but they do have a donation system where they ask a patient to donate a minimum of 100 Rupees (about 80p) if they're able to. Those who can't afford even this amount, are registered regardless and treated in exactly the same way as anyone else.

Registration process completed, I was directed towards a waiting room to see the diabetes specialist. I didn't have to wait long. I was asked questions about my

I was a bit confused and bemused to see a large sign that read: Sugar Hospital



Abdul and some of the delegates – all keen to learn about Diabetes UK

other young people could be trained to help raise awareness. Then there was a mother who said that her young son had just been admitted to a local hospital and diagnosed with Type 1. The family was struggling to understand and to cope with his condition.

Raising awareness

AIMS is doing all it can to help and

educate people about diabetes. They offer treatment and care, plus medication – including insulin – at no cost to the patient. They rely purely on donations. Most of the population in this part of Pakistan lives in remote rural areas, and AIMS has set up medical camps and clinics around these areas in order to help treat people. They were already running DESMOND diabetes education courses for people with Type 2 and were in the process of setting up DAFNE training for Type 1 patients. Indeed, the enthusiasm and dedication of all those involved with this organisation is something well worth being a witness to and I am grateful for having been given that chance.

The following day, Dr Zia and I flew together to Dubai. This being a hospital, the audience for my talk here was made up

mainly of healthcare professionals, although there were some patients present, as well.

Afterwards, on a tour, I was introduced to some patients who wanted to become diabetes Community Champions for the hospital. They were really enthusiastic about the desire to receive the training, so that they could help raise diabetes awareness. (I believe Dr Zia has plans to work on this in the future.) My experience here was extremely positive and I was once again impressed with the equal enthusiasm and passion demonstrated by the healthcare professionals and the patients.

The Pakistan Association is well known for its community-based work in Dubai, as well as for providing medical-based help to all communities and nationalities. The set-up is similar to that at the Sugar Hospital in Peshawar – offering patient care to those on a very low income.

Later that evening, I was taken to the airport for my return home. My flight took off from Dubai after a four-hour delay.

Thankfully, the delay didn't affect my blood sugar levels, but gave me the time to look back at my hectic schedule and think about all of the wonderful people, medical professionals and the patients I'd met – and

how keen they all were to learn more about diabetes, and about the work of Diabetes UK. Above all, I was overwhelmed by the kindness that they'd shown towards me in both countries as a Community Champion. Five days earlier, I'd left home to go on this mission in trepidation. Yet, here I was returning home happy that I'd taken that journey into the unknown. **db**

A mother said her young son had just been diagnosed with Type 1 and the family was struggling to cope

COMMUNITY CHAMPIONS PROGRAMME

In December, Diabetes UK's Engaging Communities Manager, Krishna Sarada, will talk about the effectiveness of diabetes education in the community at the International Diabetes Federation (IDF) Congress in Abu Dhabi.

"The Community Champions programme has great potential to reach those most at risk of diabetes in countries where healthcare is inadequate, and diabetes complications have a massive impact on people's ability to secure their livelihoods"

or buy the necessary medication for their condition," Krishna explains. "The Community Champions Programme provides the right support, advice and guidance for people with diabetes, while taking into account their culture and religion."

diabetes, my medical history, medication, blood pressure, cholesterol, lifestyle, and diet and exercise. By this time, we were getting closer to the time for the conference to start, so I was briefly shown the eye screening and footcare sections.

A large marquee had been set up for the conference on the lawn. Inside the marquee, folders were placed on the tables for each delegate, containing a notepad, a pen, some information leaflets and a copy of my book. That's when I saw it in print form for the first time. There was a large media presence, too. Various doctors and specialists who support the charity took to the stage in turn to explain the activities of AIMS and their own roles to the audience. It was a large turnout, possibly a few hundred people, including the patients, hospital staff and other dignitaries.

This is a Pashto speaking region, although they all understand Urdu, too. My talk was going to be in Urdu, so I began by saying the only two words in Pashto that I can remember: "Welcome", which served as a great ice-breaker. At the end of my talk, there was a short question-and-answer session. My audience wanted to know all about Diabetes UK's activities and seemed genuinely encouraged to learn more.

An 18-year-old young man with Type 1 came forward to tell me that one of his friends also had the condition. They were both very keen to learn and to train so that they could help raise awareness. The young man told me that he came to the conference after hearing that a Community Champion trained by Diabetes UK was giving a talk. He was very keen for AIMS to start a training programme, so that he and

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