

## **AUB panel discusses 'Health beyond Politics'**

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Health care reform should focus on distancing the sector from politics and confessionism so that Lebanese could have equitable access to services, said a panel of health specialists who met at AUB on December 14.

Discussing the findings of *Health Beyond Politics* (2009), a new book on the Lebanese health sector published by Dr. Walid Ammar, the director-general of the Ministry of Health, the panel highlighted the successes and failures of the Lebanese health care system.

"Despite political crises, economic austerity, and military conflicts, the health status of the population has been improving ... and the GDP share of expenditures has been decreasing," wrote Ammar in his book.

But the panel noted that the book is not merely descriptive, but prescriptive, offering solutions and strategies to improving the status of the health sector in the country.

Ammar highlighted some of the main findings of the book, arguing that negotiations preparing the government's accession to the World Trade Organization "have not been successful," or mindful of the country's health sector. On the other hand, the policy statement of the newly formed Cabinet has been promising. "For the first time, the policy statement includes more than one page on the health sector," said Ammar. "Usually, the section on health is barely a paragraph long."

Ammar also lauded the ministry's efforts in controlling drug prices increases, but acknowledged that the team failed in reducing prices.

Out-of-pocket expenditures on pharmaceuticals have gone down by about a third in less than a decade, he added.

The director-general also shot down some misconceptions about the health care sector. For instance, he said, 90 percent of registered drugs are generic drugs, but doctors still tend to prescribe brand drugs. Moreover, the idea that people have a hard time finding a hospital bed when they need one is false, he said. "Only one percent of patients have a problem finding a hospital bed at any given time," he said.

Dean of Health Sciences Iman Nuwayhid introduced the panel discussion, lauding Ammar's efforts at diagnosing the ills of the Lebanese health sector through an evidence-based approach.

Nuwayhid also emphasized the need for coordinating between research centers and institutions and the public center so that decision-makers would draft policies in response to national needs. The six-member panel included in addition to Ammar, Dr. Georges Aftimos, the president of the Order of Physicians; Suleiman Haroun, the president of the Syndicate of Private Hospitals; Dr. Nabil Kronfol, member of the Board of the Lebanese HealthCare Management Association (LHMA); Dr. Ghassan Issa, Public Health and Civil Society expert; and Fady El-Jardali, assistant professor of healthcare and policy at AUB. El-Jardali said the book should be considered a launching pad for health reform in Lebanon.