Welcome to the Qatar Chronicle, the newsletter of Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar. In this first edition, we take a look at some important areas of our activities, focus on the new building - one of the most exciting projects now under construction in Education City - and get to know more about our students and staff.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the word “challenge” comes up quite frequently in this issue. Meeting the challenges, and overcoming some of the difficulties of setting up a branch of Cornell University overseas and keeping it running smoothly is not to be underestimated, but it brings with it real rewards for us all.

I hope that this newsletter, and the following issues, will give all our readers a sense of what we are working towards, and how we are building our new academic community here in Doha.

WEILL CORNELL BUILDING TAKES SHAPE IN RECORD TIME

Since the summer of 2002, the new WCMC-Q building has taken shape with astonishing speed. Not only has the pace of construction amazed observers, but the form of some of the structures is also a focus of attention.

The designer, renowned Japanese architect Arata Isozaki, has created buildings across the world from Japan to Los Angeles and Barcelona.

This new design is a bold combination of the contemporary and the traditional, with influences from Islamic art and the old buildings of the Arabian Gulf. It also presents the engineers and contractors with significant logistical and construction challenges.

Just two stories high, the new Medical College building fits harmoniously with other structures on the 350-acre Education City site, just outside Doha. On the face of it, it is also a simple two-wing building with connecting bridges at second-floor level.

Where it departs from the norm, however, is in the artistic inspiration behind the lecture halls. Nestling between the protective wings of the College, the four halls stand in a row; two ovals, one 12-sided, and one 20-sided structure rise above ground level on stilts, creating a stunning vista down the central courtyard.

Right now, they are truly eye-catching. Partially clad in an under-skin of galvanized steel laid over a metal skeleton, the ovals reflect the winter sun beneath a bright blue sky. Closer inspection of the other halls shows how the next layer, a 7.5 cm thick coating of concrete, is sprayed over the steel sheets. (Go to page 2)
Science in Perspective: Biology at WCMC-Q

The whole will be finished with plaster and then painted, giving a softer effect than the gleaming metal we see now. Students who complete the basic science courses in the 2-year Pre-medical Program at WCMC-Q should have the qualifications to transfer to the main campus at Ithaca, New York; provided that they reach the required academic standards. The same would apply in reverse for students taking the courses in Ithaca, according to Dr. Antonie Blackler, Professor of Biology at WCMC-Q.

Formerly Professor of Zoology in the department of Molecular Biology and Genetics at Ithaca, the British-born and educated geneticist is a member of the pioneering faculty in Qatar. He came with a clear purpose: "I came here for one reason...that the challenge of being in on the ground floor of a new program, hoping that my contribution would be to create some organization for the teaching of biology at least at the pre-medical level, that could be handed on. An added interest was the chance to meet new students." Reflecting back over a career of some 30 years, the greatest thing has always been interacting with young people. The biology courses in the Pre-medical Program are closely related to the other sciences, indeed. Dr. Blackler feels they are interrelated. "I don't look upon them as distinct sciences. I look upon them as disciplinary areas within the general area of science." The Cornell approach, he says, is to teach the sciences in quantitative rather than qualitative terms, with "mathematical underpinning", chemistry and physics brought into the study of biology. It challenges the students to think in new ways. It follows that, while the Pre-medical Program is intended for students wishing to read medicine, it may lead them in other directions - research science, for example.

Dr. Blackler now draws on evidence from the Gulf in some of his teaching. For biomedical examples to illustrate a lecture he may, for instance, look at the higher than normal incidence of diabetes in the region. The experience of teaching in Doha is quite different from that in Ithaca, firstly in terms of sheer numbers.

"In Ithaca, I had maybe 800 students in two parts... 400 students in a lecture." In Doha, there are 25 in the inaugural class. It makes for more focused teaching, the chance to incorporate points the students raise into his lectures - and the opportunity to get to know them well. He can also pick up any problems rapidly.

On the other hand, Dr. Blackler notices a reticence among students in Qatar that contrasts with the more confident demeanor of their counterparts in the US. This may alter, however: as he says, in this second semester, there are already signs that the WCMC-Q students are changing, and developing as scientists.

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Nothing like this has ever been done before, says Ron Brooke, Construction Manager with KEO International Consultants, the company overseeing the building process: "It is certainly challenging; there is no relevant experience for construction of these kind of structures that we have found."

The College has about 35,000 square meters (355,200 square feet) of enclosed space over the two floors. 48,000 cubic meters of concrete are required in its construction, equivalent to a 60-story high-rise. The north wing accommodates extensive teaching space over both floors, with provision for supporting services. The south wing houses the administration, faculty offices and research laboratories.

"It's a simple structural building from an engineering point of view. The biggest challenge is incorporating the architectural finishes, particularly because it has a double wall system and a double roof, for insulation purposes," says Mr. Brooke, a seasoned engineer with experience of the Sydney Olympic projects. The double walls and roof enclose and protect essential services and equipment, and enhance energy efficiency. The outer walls, with their decorative white panels, are designed to take most of the heat load, an important factor in a country where daytime temperatures in summer rise well above 100 degrees Fahrenheit.

The first panels are now fitted on the west end, and the sun catches their subtle geometric pattern, echoing both traditional Islamic art and the shapes of the College auditoria. The panels also bring to mind the carved gypsum work used in Gulf architecture in the past.

Perhaps the most astonishing thing about the new WCMC-Q building, however, is the time frame. Just fourteen months separate the awarding of the contract and the due completion date at the end of June. Bearing in mind that much of the equipment and material has to be brought from outside the Gulf, and the work is being carried out to international standards, the scale of the challenge becomes clear. With 1,800 people working on the project and construction going on 24 hours a day, six days a week with reduced hours on Fridays, the speed with which the College is being built is a tribute to the dedication of the team - and an achievement in itself.

(In-depth coverage of the facilities and interior design of the new WCMC-Q building will appear in later editions of the Qatar Chronicle.)

Dr. Blackler
Professor of Biology

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Incredibly Diverse Student Body

With the second semester well underway, we are taking the opportunity in this opening edition of the Qatar Chronicle to find out a little more about our WCMC-Q students.

First and foremost, the 25-member student body is incredibly diverse: the 18 women and 7 men come from no less than eight countries. In line with our agreement with the Qatar Foundation (QF), which provides for up to 70% to be Qatari, the majority is from Qatar. Other students come from Bosnia, India, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. Among them they are a few U.S. citizens whose parents are of Arabic origin and live in the region. Most of our students are resident in Qatar, either as citizens or as expatriates, but a number are from the wider region. For example, the American citizens are expatriates based elsewhere in the Gulf. Other students are from further afield including three Bosnians, who are studying here on Qatar Foundation scholarships.

While most WCMC-Q students entered the College from high school, two of them left medical school in their home country in order to join the Cornell Pre-medical Program. Says Cynthia Andrien, Associate Dean for Admissions and Student Affairs: "I think that’s very telling. They are willing to sacrifice the time that they’ve already invested.... Medicine is a very long career, so it’s a real commitment to saying ‘I want to do this.’"

What is different about the Pre-medical Program admissions process at WCMC-Q is that all applicants are interviewed. It’s a way of finding out more about the person, and ensuring that they are making the right decision in applying to the College, says Associate Dean Andrien.

Encouraging the students to make friends and really gel is a gradual process. One reason why this is a little slower than in, say, American colleges is that most of the students live at home. Just seven are resident in student accommodation on-site, although Associate Dean Andrien hopes this will change: "Many have expressed interest in living in the dorms... and we would love to see that happen. The greatest reason is the bonding between them."

Meanwhile, outings are organized and the fantastic sports facilities at Education City are put to good use. History does not seem to record the final score in the last faculty versus students football match, laughing. Associate Dean Andrien says "I think it ended up a tie!" Bringing everyone together socially is very important, she feels. "I really do believe we are a family here."

Director of Student Affairs Settles In

Recently arrived at WCMC-Q, Director of Student Affairs Charles Paragg has moved from the freezing winter on the prairies of Canada to the beautiful sunshine of the Gulf, bringing a wealth of experience with him.

As he sits in shirt-sleeves enjoying the fresh air in his office, he remarks genially that the contrast in climate could hardly be greater. Originally from Trinidad and Tobago, and with a degree in history and political science, Mr. Paragg worked for the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg for 28 years in a variety of student affairs positions, including Registrar of the Faculty of Medicine from 1980 until last year.

How does Mr. Paragg see his role at WCMC-Q? Flexibility is clearly the hallmark of his approach, as he explains: "I don’t think there’s a student affairs portfolio really. I think it would depend on what the faculty and the school sees as the kind of thing the students need to know, and the kinds of support we need to give them.

That could be very varied, from simple advice to writing policies and procedures, and creating a charter of rights for students."

Consultation is very important: "I think it’s essential that students have input into anything that concerns them."

While he agrees that he will be drawing on his experience in Manitoba, he is careful to say that adaptations will be necessary: "That would be the framework, but I think it has to be adapted to the local customs, culture and situation."

Turning to the welfare aspect of his role, Mr. Paragg places emphasis on listening to students’ concerns, but he also expects to go out and actively promote discussion of some issues. "I think we have to be proactive in promoting welfare issues: things like stress management. And we have to have something in place where students will feel comfortable coming to discuss whatever is on their mind, whether personal or professional."

Mr. Paragg has already met the WCMC-Q student body, and is impressed. Describing them as both articulate and pleasant, he found his meeting "interesting." Certainly, there is common ground: a passionate follower of both cricket and football (he is also a football referee in his spare time), he will no doubt have plenty to talk about with the students in a country where sport has a high profile. Asked if he will be joining in the team events on campus, however, he is none too sure: "I don’t know if I have the physical stamina," he protests with a chuckle.

As he settles into his new environment and job after so many years in Canada, Mr. Paragg looks forward with excitement to the challenges ahead. His verdict: "It’s great to be here!"
In the Spotlight: Human Resources at WCMC-Q

In this edition of the Qatar Chronicle, we turn the spotlight on the Human Resources department, part of the administrative structure of the Medical College, and talk to Director of HR, Caroline Montgomery, and Manager, Linda Laing.

The five-strong HR team looks after many of the needs of the College staff, from recruitment of support personnel through to posting details of events and activities around Doha on the electronic bulletin board, to keep everyone abreast of what's going on locally. At present there are some 30 support staff and 10 faculty to look after – and the numbers are growing.

They take a very active role in caring for staff, as Caroline quips. "It's a much more 'maternalistic' approach than it would be in North America!"

At the outset, getting the right person for the job is crucial. While WCMC-Q selects employees from the local area, there are many international recruits and this makes the process complex, says Linda. "You have to take into account the whole family: the job, the employee, as well as the employee's family. So it's the whole person, because they're leaving a job and relocating not only themselves but their whole family."

The team prepares candidates, and then new employees, with great care: there is a pre-employment visit, preferably with the spouse; a pre-departure package for new staff before they come to work in Doha, to help them find their feet; someone to meet them on arrival at the airport; transition housing and an information package to make them feel welcome.

Assistance is provided with such important details as residence visas, driving licenses, and their new, more permanent, home. As Linda puts it, "We aim to make employees independent as quickly as possible, but with support." If difficulties arise, then assistance is available: the College has an employee assistance program and a counselor who will see people on a confidential basis. Members of staff and faculty are also encouraged to take regular home leave, and those who have chosen to come without family are encouraged to bring their families out to Doha.

WCMC-Q students were 'all at sea' for their first trip of the year, sailing in a dhow – a traditional Arabian Gulf boat – out of Doha Bay and over to a nearby island. We organized the outing in the spirit of the orientation event at WCMC in New York, where students take a boat-trip on the Hudson River. Our orientation also included a city tour of Doha, taking in the traditional souqs or markets. Notwithstanding the heat, this 'ice-breaking' adventure was very successful.

Opening exercises were held on September 2, 2002; the students were presented with the Cornell pre-medical pin to mark their entry into the WCMC-Q Pre-medical Program.

To add to the excitement of being accepted onto the Pre-medical Program, our students attended the brilliant inaugural ceremony on October 6, 2002.

Held in the presence of HH Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al-Thani, Emir of the State of Qatar, and HH Sheikha Mozah Bint Nasser Al-Missned, consort of the Emir and Chairperson of the Qatar Foundation, the ceremony was attended by Mr. Sanford L. Weil, Dr. Antonio M. Gatto Jr., M.D. and other members of the Joint Advisory Board of WCMC-Q. The ceremony was broadcast live on television and widely reported in the local press – the first time that Their Highnesses had appeared in public together before the cameras.

To celebrate the Holy month of Ramadhan, an iftar (a meal eaten at sunset, to break the daily fast) was organized in a traditional tent at the Diplomatic Club in Doha. Faculty and students joined together in this popular event.

On a lighter note, the faculty vs. student football matches proved entertaining, and after-match pizza rounded off the events for all.

New arrivals at WCMC-Q

We have the pleasure to announce the following births:

* Alexander Bijan Kolali, born on November 11, 2002 to Abraham and Nicole Kolali. Abraham is Senior Network Manager at WCMC-Q.

* Adeline Kathryn Able, born on December 28, 2002 to Dr. David and Karen Able. Dr. Able, Lecturer in Biology, taught at WCMC-Q during the fall semester last year.

Coming Up: an evening of opera

Qatar Foundation presents an evening of opera with Jennifer Dakin (soprano) and Bonaventure Borrut (tenor), accompanied by Steve Griffiths (piano), to be held at the Qatar Academy auditorium on Tuesday February 18 at 7:30 p.m.

Dhow Trip a Great Success

Staff from WCMC-Q, the Academic Bridge Program and Qatar Academy spent a day of fun in the sun on board a huge dhow in late January. The trip was organized mainly for fishing; however, the fish had clearly been warned in advance, as the only specimen caught was one 7-inch sherry!

In the event, there was lots of fun, games and camaraderie for the 23 people who signed up for the trip, to compensate for the disappointing catch. Many had the opportunity to try parasailing, which was particularly exciting for the children. The party anchored at a cape on Banana Island and went exploring while others went swimming, and still others set out in search of seashells.

The day was such a success that there are plans for another dhow trip in March.