

# TUMOUR BLASTER

## Pioneering cancer treatment to be made available in Gulf

**T**HE Middle East's first centre dedicated to proton therapy, a precise form of radiation treatment for cancer sufferers, is set to open in Doha ... and executives say it will allow patients in Bahrain the chance to receive an advanced medical treatment close to home.

It allows higher doses of radiation to be used to tackle cancerous growths and has proven to significantly reduce damage to healthy tissues and vital organs close by.

Pioneered in the US in the 1940s, the first hospital was not established until 1990. To date proton therapy is said to have benefitted more than 60,000 patients.

SAH Qatar Proton Centre, a subsidiary of the US-based SAH Global, is to be built at a cost of approximately \$150 million and will eventually be able to treat up to 2,200 patients a year.

It is also expected to serve as a research and training centre for



HEALTH EXCLUSIVE

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physicians and therapists.

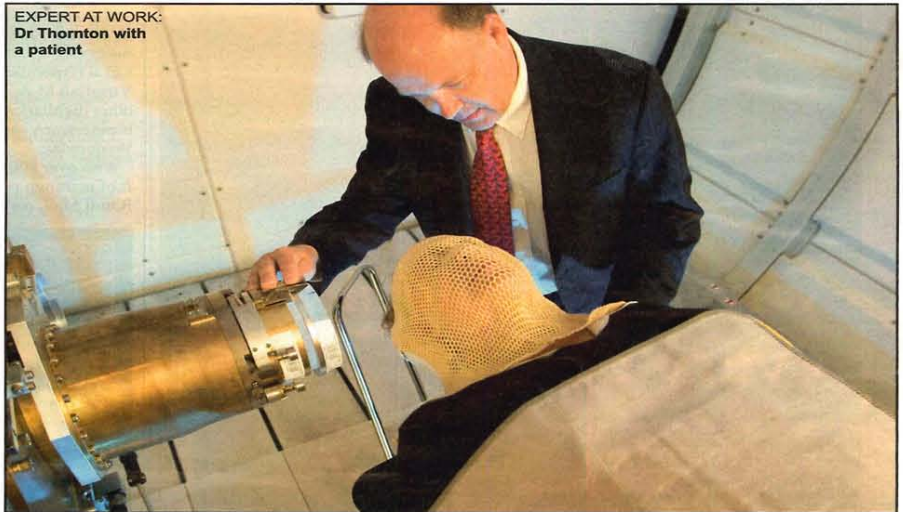
The organisation will shortly be setting up an office in Bahrain to assist local cancer patients to access the treatment in its sister centres in the US until the operation is up-and-running in the Gulf region.

Planners say the proposed Bahrain/Qatar Friendship Bridge to be built in advance of the FIFA World Cup Finals in 2022 will also prove a huge bonus by offering fast road and rail links between Manama and Doha.

The SAH Qatar Proton Centre is being constructed under a licence awarded by the Supreme Council of Health of the State of Qatar that allows SAH Global to build, own, and operate a Proton Therapy Centre for treatment of cancer patients from the region and beyond, without the need of a local sponsor.

The firm is currently looking to purchase land and hopes to get the centre up and running within three

EXPERT AT WORK:  
Dr Thornton with a patient



years. Until then they are offering a free evaluation service for cancer patients who could benefit from proton therapy to access US facilities.

Feroz Agad, chairman and chief executive officer of SAH Global, said his interest in proton therapy arose when he lost close family members to cancer and his research

led him to understand and appreciate the effects of proton therapy.

Mr Agad, 35, added: "The reason we are promoting proton therapy is because we have found that it is the most precise form of treatment.

"However, the initial investment in a Proton therapy centre is very high and the number of doctors who can treat with protons are very few.

"We have managed to bring on board four experts including Dr Allan Thornton, the most senior specialist in the world, who can even re-treat a patient who has already undergone unsuccessful treatment with conventional radiation. We are very fortunate to have him."

# Proton therapy gives hope

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Mr Agad added: "We are currently taking patients from the Middle East to the US to get treatment. We have a medical tourism division that is helping afflicted patients by providing services from visa processing to accommodation and preferential treatment slots.

"Any hospital or doctor who believes that proton therapy can help their patient can send us the files which we will review. We are offering this service free of charge.

"If they qualify and they cannot afford the treatment we will talk to different charitable organisations that may be able to help patients foot the bill."

The Qatar centre is going to work independently from any university, organisation, health ministry or government body and will be open to all nationalities.

Some health commentators, however, are critical of the costs of proton therapy which can prove more expensive initially than conventional radiotherapy and others complain that many insurance companies refuse cover.

Mr Agad said that his company is already in negotiations with three of the world's leading insurance firms to ensure the costs of treatment are covered. Hitting back, he said: "I disagree with a lot of the reports that claim that proton therapy is 30 to 40 per cent more expensive than conventional radiation.

"What some critics fail to calculate, or take into account, are the other additional costs of



PIONEERING TREATMENT: From left, Dr Thornton, cancer researcher Dr Azhar Iqbal and Mr Agad

the alternatives. For example, with less focused treatment patients have to deal with nausea and have time off work which all adds up. I believe the prices of treatment in Doha will be very similar to conventional radiation therapy."

He says the average cost of proton therapy in the Gulf will be around \$95,000 (BD36,000) to \$100,000 (BD38,000) for 30 to 45 treatment cycles. It currently costs on average \$150,000-175,000 (BD56,400-65,800) in the US.

"We have implemented a lot of technological advancements. Where we actually excel is in the fact that the side-

effects are minimal."

Mr Agad claims that in conventional treatment patients often have to spend on average \$15,000 to help with vomiting and nausea attacks. On top of that many suffer from malnutrition, lose so much weight that another \$22,000 has to be spent on pills and other calcium-enhanced vitamins.

"The patient is completely worn out," he explained, "whereas proton therapy is precision targeted. Our treatment takes less than one minute and on average a patient will take just 23 minutes in the centre. A lot of our patients go back to playing a round of golf or

return to work straight afterwards!

"We hope to be able to treat all types of breast cancer. Prostate cancer is probably one of the best candidates for proton therapy along with any head and neck tumours.

"Patients who generally have prostate cancer turn to surgery or radiotherapy. When you turn to surgery you remove the prostate gland. When you turn to radiotherapy, in the conventional way, you destroy the prostate gland completely and as a result the man cannot have children or enjoy a healthy sexual relationship.

"With proton therapy we are not removing or destroying the prostate gland, which is very important with respect to the quality of life we are offering after proton therapy."

Oncology experts in Bahrain have initially welcomed the plans. Dr Nisha Pillai, senior resident, Department of Oncology, Salmaniya Medical Complex, said: "Proton therapy is considered an advanced method of treating cancer and is supposed to be very good for targeted therapy. Side-effects are also technically reduced because the surrounding organs are spared."

SAH Global is also planning to discuss with potential strategic partners and investors proposals to open five more proton therapy centres in the Middle East and Asia including one in Saudi Arabia and Malaysia.

For more details visit [www.sahglobal.com](http://www.sahglobal.com) or [www.sahqatar.com](http://www.sahqatar.com)