

Building capacity in Iraqi medical education and healthcare: the establishment, achievements and future vision of the RCP Iraq Network (2021–31)

Dr Shakir Mahmood Muhammed, consultant respiratory physician and member of the RCP Iraq Network steering committee shares the achievements and the future of the RCP Iraq Network.

Healthcare advancement depends heavily on high-quality medical education, research productivity and effective healthcare delivery systems. Countries undergoing healthcare system development frequently encounter challenges in physician workforce development, access to educational opportunities, research capacity and alignment with international standards.

In response to these challenges, the RCP Iraq Network was established in Iraq in 2021 as an educational body operating in accordance with the principles and standards of the RCP, under the supervision of RCP Global. The initiative was founded by Professor Hilal Al-Saffar, who was serving as RCP international adviser to Iraq, and it was guided by the slogan 'Together, we are stronger and smarter'. This vision emphasised collaboration as a means of strengthening Iraqi healthcare and professional development.

The network's activities were organised around three interconnected pillars:

- > **medical education**
- > **medical research**
- > **healthcare provision.**

Its mission was to create a sustainable framework capable of producing measurable improvements in healthcare delivery and medical professional development in Iraq.

Development and achievements of the network (2021–25)

Expansion of the RCP community in Iraq

One of the earliest indicators of success was the substantial expansion of the RCP community within

Iraq. Before the network's establishment, Iraq ranked 36th globally in terms of the number of RCP members and fellows. By 2025, Iraq had advanced to become the first-ranked country outside the UK, reflecting substantial growth in participation and institutional involvement.

Establishment of the MRCP(UK) exams in Iraq

A major milestone was the reintroduction of the MRCP(UK) Part I and Part II exams in Iraq, through collaboration with the University of Baghdad's College of Medicine. This initiative reduced geographical and financial barriers, and improved accessibility for Iraqi physicians pursuing postgraduate qualifications.

The network has also initiated a fruitful discussion with the RCP to pave the way for introducing the MRCP(UK) PACES exam in Iraq. In this field, the network organised four training mock examinations in different Iraqi provinces – Sulaymaniyah, Baghdad, Karbala and Thi-Qar – to demonstrate Iraq's readiness to host the PACES exams. In addition, the network conducted numerous training sessions and workshops to help candidates pass the PACES exams successfully and for Iraqi consultants to serve as examiners.

The participation of Iraqi candidates has not only grown in number but also in success, with pass rates of 65.8% for Part I, 92.1% for Part II and 38.7% for the PACES exam in 2024.

Educational and scientific activities

Medical education represents a major component of the network's mission. Numerous lectures, workshops, multidisciplinary meetings and educational programmes were organised face to face or online. Consultants from inside and outside Iraq, including senior officers from the RCP, have delivered or actively participated in delivering these activities. These have covered a wide range of medical specialties, including medical education, medical research, evidence-based medicine, AI in healthcare, respiratory medicine, endocrinology, cardiology, neurology, nephrology and soft skill competencies relevant to medical careers. Annually, the network has

organised about 35 activities with participation of more than 1,800 participants.

International training opportunities

Recognising the value of international exposure in professional development, the network collaborated with the University of Bristol and affiliated hospitals in the UK to establish elective clinical training opportunities for Iraqi resident doctors and medical students. These programmes aimed to improve clinical skills, strengthen professional competencies and enhance international academic collaboration. The network successfully sent 31 candidates to participate in this structured clinical elective training.

Empowerment of young healthcare professionals

Recognising the need to develop future healthcare leaders, the network established the Iraqi Young Educators Programme (IYEP), aiming to strengthen skills in medical education, research methodology and leadership development.

To achieve the network's aim of connecting relevant institutions, the network has signed collaboration agreements with 14 Iraqi medical colleges across Iraq, including in the Kurdistan region – as well as with the Iraqi Infectious Diseases Society and the Iraqi Red Crescent Society.

Future strategic vision: RCP Iraq Network strategy (2026–31)

Building on achievements from its initial years, the network developed a strategic framework for the period 2026–31 under the theme 'From professional networking to national impact'.

Strategic vision, mission and core values

The vision of the network is to become Iraq's leading professional platform for physician excellence, modernisation of medical education, research capacity development and clinical quality improvement aligned with international standards.

The mission is to strengthen Iraq's physician workforce through the integration of:

- > clinical excellence
- > innovation in medical education
- > research advancement
- > leadership development
- > international collaboration.

The ultimate aim is sustainable improvement in patient care and healthcare outcomes. The core values to guide the network's strategic framework are professional

integrity, evidence-based practice, educational excellence, collaboration, sustainability and national service.

I have had the privilege of being part of the network's journey from its cradle – as an ambitious vision – to its emergence as a leading platform for advancing medical education, research and healthcare development in Iraq. Over a relatively short period, the network has achieved significant successes, made possible by the dedication of our members, the support of our national and international partners, and our unwavering commitment to internationally recognised standards of excellence.

Building on these achievements, the 2026–31 strategy marks the next chapter in our evolution. It reflects our aspiration to move beyond professional networking and educational activities toward generating a broader, more sustainable impact on Iraq's healthcare system.

We are proud of what has been achieved so far and confident that the network will continue to catalyse healthcare workforce development, educational excellence and innovation. By working together, we can further establish a model of success that inspires progress not only in the Iraqi healthcare system, but also in other healthcare systems facing similar challenges.

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