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Reichman University aiming to open Israel's first private medical school – with Sheba



Professor Uriel Reichman at Reichman University in Herzliya.

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Professor Uriel Reichman, founder and chairman of Reichman University, Herzliya, is working to establish Israel's first private medical school in conjunction with Sheba Medical Center, Tel Hashomer, where clinical training will take place. The goal is to enroll 70-100 students per year.

In recent months, Reichman has been holding meetings to promote the initiative, and devoting most of his time to recruiting donors. "We are working hard to raise money from civil society, from the private sector and from donors," he tells TheMarker. "I presume and hope that we'll be able to raise the resources and as soon as we have the initial sum in hand, we'll get underway to our full ability."

If Reichman's plan becomes a reality and he gets the money and the necessary permits, it would be the first private medical school to operate in Israel. Currently there are six medical schools in Israel, all of them at the public universities.

Tuition has not yet been decided, but is expected to be tens of thousands of shekels per year. Medical studies require a lot of resources: The state subsidizes each medical student with 65,000 shekels (\$20,000) per year of his or her studies – not including tuition of 11,000 shekels a year. Although Reichman plans to finance the founding of the school through donations,

there will likely be criticism that this medical school will only be for the wealthy – for students who can afford to pay hundreds of thousands of shekels.

"The government could easily solve this by offering stipends to students who study medicine," he replies. "University tuition is low because the state significantly subsidizes it. We are not opposed to state support for the students, in our medical school or university."

"According to the principle of equality, the state should equally support every student who attends a recognized institution. We are contributing significantly to establish the faculty, and the state could aid students with tuition, with the same amount that it gives to the universities," Reichman says. He adds, "We will aim to give stipends to our students on a socioeconomic basis."

The timing of Reichman's initiative is not coincidental, but comes on the heels of three related trends. The first is the extremely high rate of Israeli doctors who did their medical studies abroad: Among Western countries, Israel is the leader in the percentage of doctors who were trained outside the country – 60 percent in recent years.

The second is the quality of medical studies outside of Israel: While there are some excellent schools abroad, there are also medical schools of very low quality that offer minimal clinical training. These schools were

disqualified by a reform that stipulated that, as of 2019, only graduates of medical schools in OECD countries, or graduates of other medical schools who have received special permission, can take the medical licensing exams in Israel.

The third issue is the severe shortage of doctors that is anticipated in the coming years, in the wake of the reform. In the past decade, the growth rate of the number of people who studied abroad earning medical licenses (22 percent per year) was much higher than that of Israeli graduates (7 percent per year). Among the graduates of foreign medical schools, the group that grew the fastest were graduates of medical schools that were disqualified by the reform – double the number of students who studied at approved foreign medical schools.

As a result, a dramatic drop in the number of newly licensed doctors is expected in the coming years – a situation that requires a rapid increase in the number of new medical students in Israel and in the medical schools approved in the reform.

The anticipated doctor shortage will directly impact the basic problems of the health system and the efforts to solve them: shortening residents' shifts, building two new hospitals, the lengthening waiting time to get an appointment with medical specialists.

In January, a committee appointed by the Council of

Higher Education recommended increasing the number of medical students in Israel by 50 percent, from 800-1,200 each year, within four years. In so doing, the CHE adopted the Health Ministry's recommendations.

The low number of medical students in Israel is usually explained by the shortage of clinical fields/rotations – the study that takes places in hospitals around the patient's bed, accompanying doctors, in the three clinical years of medical school. But on several occasions in recent years, it has been shown that this argument does not hold water.

A study done by the Health Ministry found that the clinical rotations are not being optimally used and that they could be significantly expanded with the current infrastructure. Additionally, clinical training programs in Israeli hospitals for students from foreign universities, in afternoon hours in return for payment to the hospitals, show that when there is desire and financing, the clinical rotations can be significantly increased.

In fact, this week the Health Ministry issued a warning to the hospitals that are offering clinical training for a fee to students who study medicine abroad. The ministry said that the agreements with the foreign universities must be coordinated with it and the universities in Israel with which the hospital is affiliated, and be subject to their approval.

Professor Arnon Afek, deputy director of Sheba Medical Center, said that when he was director-general of the Health Ministry, the shortage of clinical rotations was "the biggest fairy tale" and that the number of students could be increased using the existing infrastructure. Among the measures he suggested: afternoon classes, shortening medical studies and using advanced teaching methods that would require fewer clinical rotations.

Medical schools are considered the holy grail of academia. Each time a new faculty has been established, it has run into obstacles and opposition from existing faculties. Opening a new medical school requires approval from the Council of Higher Education and the Committee for Planning and Budgeting, and they may not hasten to give their blessing for the opening of a new medical school.

Reichman, whose university last August received recognition as Israel's first private university, has no illusions that the task will be easy. However, he says his intention is to do for medical school what he once did for law school.

"Until the 1990s, there was a tremendous shortage of spots for law school and the gates of higher education were nearly closed to hundreds of thousands of people who wanted to study but weren't able to. We breached these gates and the problem was solved. Today there is a similar situation with medical school, which is hard for me to accept. I find it absurd that a country like Israel, which has such a high level of medicine, is unable to produce enough doctors."

He says, "The situation requires the opening of two more medical schools and we are capable of doing this. We see this as a very important thing for the development of our university, and also as a matter of supreme national importance."

The Health Ministry said: "The matter requires the approval of the Council of Higher Education and the Committee for Planning and Budgeting. If an application is received from these two bodies, it will be considered."

The Council of Higher Education said: "The CHE is working to increase the number of medical students within the framework of the existing schools, through optimal usage of clinical rotations in the hospitals and in the community."