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In It for the Long Run

Iqbal Survé on Health
and Happiness



“The most basic objective of good healthcare is not just to save people’s lives but to give them a better quality of life and indeed to make people happy.”

Dr. Iqbal Survé, Chairman, Sekunjalo Investment Holdings, Cape Town, South Africa

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On the same veranda where, in the early 20th century, tuberculosis patients spent years breathing away their disease, visitors like Iqbal Survé today can enjoy a cup of coffee – weather permitting.

Doing Good and Doing Well

Arriving in Davos, Switzerland, Iqbal Survé had to cope with a 45-degree Celcius drop in temperature within hours. But the South African business leader and former anti-Apartheid activist adapted quickly. Survé, a member of the Siemens Sustainability Advisory Board, jumped about in the snow. After all, life is about happiness.

By Philipp Grätzel von Grätz, MD

Where if not at the World Economic Forum in Davos could one meet and discuss sustainability? And where if not in the Schatzalp Hotel could one talk about what is and is not sustainable in healthcare and healthcare policy? The former tuberculosis clinic with its splendid view of Rinerhorn inspired Nobel Prize winner Thomas Mann to write his most famous novel "The Magic Mountain" in 1924. After World War II, the sanatorium closed permanently. But the Schatzalp building survived the European tuberculosis pandemic to reinvent itself as a hotel that deals playfully with its morbid past. Thomas Mann's favorite cigars, for example, can be ordered in the X-ray bar, which still features the massive light boxes that were used to show chest radiographs to early twentieth century patients. And on the Art Nouveau veranda, where these same patients spent literally years just lying around and breathing, guests can now enjoy a simple coffee. With temperatures of minus ten degrees Celcius, Iqbal Survé preferred to talk inside, though. And rather than contemplating illness, like the "Magic Mountain" protagonists, Survé preferred to envision a future when individual health and a sustainable lifestyle go very much hand in hand.

"The Magic Mountain" is the story of a young man who uses illness as an excuse for retreating from a world in transformation. Today, the world is transforming again. What role – if any – does healthcare play in the global sustainability debates?

SURVÉ: Let me start by saying that this is really a great setting. The fact that we are in a former tuberculosis clinic is interesting from a sustainability point of view, because the history of tuberculosis can teach us something about the link between healthcare and sustainability. Tuberculosis is a disease that was rampant in Europe during early industrialization. Today, it is a disease of developing countries and virtually absent from many parts of Western Europe. There is a clear message here: Industrialization brought advances in basic sanitation, in basic conditions of humanity. This was the main reason why Europe was able to eliminate tuberculosis, and it obviously was a very sustainable solution. Shipping tuberculosis patients up here, by contrast, was not too sustainable outside the realm of literature. To answer your question: Healthcare is certainly not at the heart of most sustainability debates, which tend to center on energy and climate. But

"Health is systemic, and because it is systemic it will always be linked to sustainability."

Iqbal Survé, MD, Chairman,
Sekunjalo Investment Holdings,
Cape Town, South Africa

since health depends on factors like drinkable water or clean air, we cannot ignore it. Health is systemic, and because it is systemic it will always be linked to sustainability.

How would you explain the concept of sustainability to a school boy?

SURVÉ: I like the simplest definition, which is leaving a future for our children. Once you start thinking about what kind of life your children are going to have in the future, you are already in the middle of the sustainability debate. Sustainability

is about actively creating an environment for the future without sacrificing values, cultural traditions, or the environment.

Before you became a business leader and sustainability expert, you worked as a medical doctor. How do these two worlds go together? Where is the sustainability in your own career?

SURVÉ: The common factor is values. No matter what I did, it was always about trying to create a better future, a pursuit of happiness, if you like. When I was a medical doctor, I was also a political activist under Apartheid. What drove my sense of involvement at that time was that I wanted to overcome injustice, to overcome poverty, to help create a better South Africa, a more sustainable future. When Apartheid ended in 1994, the Mandela government realized that to get the new South Africa going, we needed not only a political but also an economic transformation. The problem was that black people were excluded from big business during Apartheid. So Mandela said: Some of you will have to give up a career and go into business. That is how I became a business leader. The question then was in which direction to go. I started thinking about business in terms of poverty reduction, job creation, giving people dignity, and ended up as chair of a financial services company that funds sustainable business projects.

You said that values are at the heart of sustainability. What are the core values of the old healthcare world that should be kept in a sustainable future healthcare system?

SURVÉ: I have always been convinced that the most basic objective of good healthcare is not just to save people's lives or to heal people but to give them a better quality of life and indeed to make people happy. The ultimate objective of life is becoming happy. We are very fortunate today that we've got the technology to be able to deliver a much better quality of life to many people, and we should use it for everybody's sake. On the other hand, it is clear that healthcare needs to become far more efficient in order to become sustainable. Technology can help



Iqbal Survé, MD, is one of the leading experts on sustainability worldwide. As such, he is one of ten members of the Siemens Sustainability Advisory Board that was created in 2009 in order to help Siemens maintain a position as a global leader in the provision of sustainable technologies. Survé was a medical doctor in South Africa before he decided to become a social entrepreneur after the end of the Apartheid regime. He is Chairman of the Sekunjalo Group, a company that focuses on offering financial services and support to sustainable business projects with a focus on Sub-Saharan Africa. Dr. Survé is a member of various prestigious boards, such as the HRH the Prince of Wales's Business & the Environment Programme, and was a founding member of the Clinton Global Initiative of former US President Bill Clinton, where he served as an Advisory Board member on Governance.

enormously in reaching this goal. More energy-efficient medical technology, for example, will help hospitals free money that they can spend for the benefit of the people instead. Digitizing care processes will have similar benefits. And it is also sustainable, because it saves paper and trees and protects the environment. A company like Siemens, with its strengths in healthcare and in sustainable technology, is uniquely positioned to be at the forefront of this development. And they should push forward. It is good for the people, for healthcare, and for business. I like the saying: 'Do good and do well at the same time.' This is my prime advice to healthcare companies.

But switching to sustainable technology in healthcare is remarkably expensive in the beginning, isn't it? How will particularly low-income countries be able to cope with that?

SURVÉ: I don't think we have a choice. The economist Joseph Stiglitz makes the point that when people talk about a green economy, they tend to say it is too expensive to develop solar or wind energy, for example. But this is the wrong way to look at it. Yes, it is more costly today. But in the long run, a developing – I prefer the term fast-growing – economy will enjoy considerable benefits, in terms of energy as well as healthcare.

Sounds good in theory; but does it work in practice?

SURVÉ: I can give you a good example. One of the legacies of Apartheid in South Africa was that it had created a health-care system that was designed to care for the white community only. So when the new government came in, a big task was to implement a working healthcare system for 35 million instead of six million people within a very short time. We pumped a lot of money into these efforts, but we were not able to achieve the desired outcome. So we looked at Europe and realized that in big European hospitals, more or less all processes are assisted by IT solutions that increase efficiency. We then approached the regional government and said: Look, are you prepared to spend a billion Rand in order to equip a big tertiary hospital in Cape Town with a modern IT infrastructure? They were. Today, it is a more or less paperless hospital that communicates digitally, not only within the institution but also with community clinics and mid-sized hospitals. And I tell you: It is a thousand times more efficient than any other South African hospital.

Did other regions jump on the bandwagon?

SURVÉ: We are busy implementing a similar solution in Gauteng. And we are in discussions in other provinces as well. But you really have to convince every minister in every regional government. It's hard work.

Would it help if companies tried to develop different products with different price levels for different countries? Or should they just try to make their products sufficiently cheap?

SURVÉ: I prefer the alternative you suggested: Let us try to develop the best technology for everyone, while also making it more affordable. This makes more sense from a business point of view as well, because you sell your technology to a much greater target group. We should also not forget that the economic world atlas has changed forever. The one thing that prevented the world economy from suffering a complete

collapse in the recent crisis was the fact that China and India were still buying. If this had not been the case, it would have been the end of the market economy as you and I know it. What we can learn from the field of telecommunications is that economies like Africa, China, India, and Brazil can make the technological quantum leaps pretty quickly. This represents a major opportunity for large western companies. My message is: When it comes to creating a sustainable future in healthcare, there is a golden opportunity to be an early mover in fast-growing economies these days. Grabbing this opportunity makes business sense. It makes environmental sense. And it makes sense for humanity.

In "The Magic Mountain," psychoanalyst Dr. Krokowski contemplates health, and he says: "I, for one, have never in my life come across a perfectly healthy human being." The WHO took up this extremely broad concept of health 30 years later when it defined health as a state of total physical, mental, and social wellbeing. Don't we need a less ambitious concept of health for a truly sustainable future of healthcare?

SURVÉ: We do need a new concept of health, but we do not need a less ambitious one. A healthcare system can only be sustainable in the long run if it takes prevention seriously. And this implies having a broad concept of health. But it does not necessarily mean that it is all about doctors and institutions. Again: It's all systemic. The ultimate goal of life is happiness. One of the things you need in order to be happy is health. And in order to be healthy, you not only need a working healthcare system that provides good care to everyone, you also need drinkable water, an intact social environment, clean air. And these are all sustainability topics. Sustainability is about future generations, their health, and their happiness.

Philipp Grätzel von Grätz is a medical doctor turned freelance writer and book author based in Berlin, Germany. His focus is on biomedicine, medical technology, health IT, and health policy.

Further Information

www.siemens.com/sustainability



The sanatorium turned hotel Schatzalp (www.schatzalp.ch) features beautiful Art Nouveau architecture and furnishings – and room for thought about sustainable healthcare.

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