

Shafallah set to host international forum

AILYN AGONIA - DOHA The three-day 4th Annual International Forum at the Shafallah Center here will provide a global platform for top educators, policymakers and organisations to discuss strategies about inspiring individuals with special needs to achieve maximum independence.

The event, to be held at the Shafallah Center from April 20 to 22, will focus on the role of such individuals' families and the society through presentations and workshops.

A good number of first ladies and wives of prime ministers of different countries like Panama, Albania, the UK, Lebanon and Morocco, together with organisation leaders and other experts in the field of autism and disability, will participate in the forum.



Inaugurating the forum's Media Center here on Saturday, Shafallah Chairman Dr Hassan Ali bin Ali said that this year's forum theme — 'Achieving Independence' — would put emphasis on independence as the first step to achieve development among individuals with special needs. He said, "Every year we choose a theme which addresses the current concerns in the field of autism and disability. We invite speakers and guests, who are concerned or experts in these areas. But aside from the lectures and sessions, the forum is an opportunity for Shafallah's department heads and those concerned with administration to further our relations with different international organisations. An example is our continuing collaboration with Autism Speaks in the field of research, particularly finding cure to autism.

Generally, the forum serves as a venue where scientists and experts meet and discuss researches and ways to cure autism." Dr Hassan remarked, "Achieving independence for people with disabilities is a revolutionary process. It means changing laws in some countries, but more importantly, changing hearts and minds. We must remove all the barriers to independence in order to find jobs and create new opportunities to live and learn. Over the course of three days, this Forum will ask some tough questions and hopefully shed some new light on how we can work together to achieve these goals."

The Shafallah chairman also expressed his appreciation for the active participation of Cherie Blair, co chair of the forum and patron of Scope, Robert Wright, cofounder of Autism Speaks, His Excellency Luis Gallegos, Ambassador of Ecuador to the United States and past chair of the United Nations Ad-hoc Preparatory Committee on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Dr. Mary Ellen Lewis, Director of Educational Projects, Kennedy Krieger Institute, to mention a few.

Shafallah's Deputy Managing Director Sameera al Qassimi and Board Member Dr Khalid bin Jabor al Thani also briefed on the importance of the upcoming forum, especially in furthering the advocacies of the Center. About five presentations of Shafallah on community service, behavioural analysis, speech and language will also be among the core topics during the forum. The other key presentations by the international delegation will include 'Growing up to Achieve Independence', to be moderated by Autism Speaks co-founder Bob Wright, sessions promoting access of individuals with disability to employment with experts and educators like the former president of World Bank James Wolfensohn and Marcie Roth of US-based National Coalition for Disability Rights. Cherie Blair, also a leading human rights lawyer, will also deliver a keynote speech.

Among the other high-profile dignitaries to participate include Teuta Topi of Albania, Vivian Fernandez de Torrijos of Panama, Maria Kaczynska of Poland, Xiomara Castro de Zelaya of Honduras, Madame Dorrit Moussaieff of Iceland as well as the wife of the Prime Minister of Lebanon Madame Hoda Siniora and Princess of Morocco Lalla Amina.

International Paralympic Committee President Sir Philip Craven, Carl Lewis of Best Buddies, Syria's Minister of Social Affairs Dr Diala al Haj will also grace the event.