

Here for their health, not a holiday



Bakery owner Nguyen Huu Phuoc and his niece, who declined to be named. He spent about \$100,000 to have a kidney transplant here. ST PHOTO: NEO XIAOBIN

Forking out 3 years of income 'well worth it'

MR NGUYEN Huu Phuoc, 55, spent three years' income from his bakery to pay for his medical treatment in Singapore last month, but it is well worth the money, he said.

He is part of a growing group of Vietnamese patients coming here for serious treatment - making Vietnam the fourth-biggest market for foreign patients.

The native of Ho Chi Minh City in southern Vietnam was diagnosed with kidney problems two years ago.

Doctors there could not stop the deterioration of his kidney function, and towards the end of last year, told him he was approaching total kidney failure.

He had two choices - go on dialysis for the rest of his life, or get a kidney transplant.

"I decided immediately to have a transplant," he said through a translator.

But Mr Nguyen's only brother has died and his only child, a son, is just 19 years old. In Singapore, living organ donors must be at least 21 years old.

He was lucky that his business partner of 15 years was not only compatible, but willing to give up a kidney for his long-time friend.

He decided immediately to come to Singapore for the transplant.

He had heard of the high transplant success rate from a

customer of his, who came here for medical treatment.

His 30-year-old bakery brings him over \$2,000 a month. He is frugal and has some savings, most of it now spent on the treatment here.

Mr Nguyen said: **"It's very expensive here, about 10 times what I would have had to pay in Vietnam.**

"But I am confident of a good outcome, and that gives me peace of mind."

The high price - estimated at around \$100,000 - includes the cost of airfare for his English-speaking niece who accompanied him, and for his donor, as well as post-operation accommodation, since he needed several follow-up checks within the month.

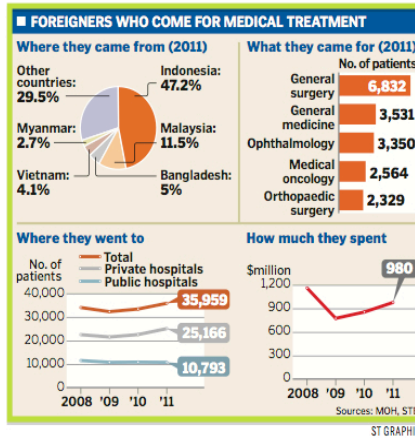
He had his operation at Mount Elizabeth Hospital on Jan 15. His partner, 46, recovered quickly and returned to take care of the bakery.

Mr Nguyen said that he was impressed with the service from the first day he stepped into the hospital.

"It was more than I expected. The nurse comes to the ward every day, the doctor spent time talking and explaining things to me," he said, adding: **"I will strongly recommend coming to Singapore for treatment if any of my family members or friends are seriously ill."**

One is a businessman from Vietnam who is facing total kidney failure. The other is a psychologist from Bangladesh where experts found a growth in her liver. They both flew to Singapore to take advantage of a level of success and expertise in medical treatment that they cannot easily find in their home countries.

Health Correspondent
Salma Khalik reports



Outpatients far outnumber those who are warded

ACCORDING to industry observers, for every foreign patient warded or here for day surgery, more than 10 are treated as outpatients.

There are no official estimates of the number who come for outpatient consultations and treatments, but the figure of 500,000 a year is considered likely.

Treatments include simple health screening to botox injections to improve looks and specialist outpatient consultations.

Many are "regulars" who come annually or every two years for check-ups. Some,

who suffer from chronic ailments such as diabetes or heart problems, come more frequently.

Some of these outpatients might come with their families and take in a holiday at the same time.

There are also **businessmen from the region who add a day or two to a business trip for a medical consultation.**

The majority of outpatients are from the region, with Indonesians and Malaysians dominating. However, increasingly, these "regular" patients come from as far away as Russia.



Psychologist Dilruba Afrose, 68, with her grandchildren (from left) Rafat, six, and twins Farhat and Farhan, both 10. ST PHOTO: NEO XIAOBIN

'High level of surgery only available here'

LAST November, Bangladeshi virologist Islam Nazrul attended a talk by Singapore doctors in Dhaka, on the range of expertise and treatments available here.

The following month, his wife, psychologist Dilruba Afrose, 68, noticed she was passing very dark-coloured urine.

Professor Islam feared it meant something wrong with the liver and sent her for an ultrasound and computed tomography scan.

Experts in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, found a growth in the liver, which is one of the most complex organs to operate on. He immediately contacted a Singapore liver surgeon he had met at the talk and was told to bring his wife over soonest.

He not only brought his wife here last month, but also their only daughter and her family.

Prof Islam said if the problem was serious, his wife would need their moral support, especially that of their three young grandsons. They are a very close-knit family and not a day passes without them seeing their grandchildren.

By then, his wife was sick, nauseous and tired most of the time, and had little appetite.

The doctors here diagnosed cancer of the liver. Fortunately, it did not appear to have spread, and was in the form of one tumour that was about 3cm long.

Within days of their arrival, she had surgery at Gleneagles Hospital to remove the left lobe of her liver. She started to feel better almost immediately, although she was still tired.

After a month here, they returned to Dhaka, but will be back next month for her to start chemotherapy, just in case any of the cancer cells spread. Otherwise, the surgery was highly successful.

Said Prof Islam: **"This high level of surgery is only available in Singapore, not even in India."**

While it was expensive, he said looking at the breakdown of costs, it was "reasonable".

This is not the first time the family has come here for medical treatment. Their daughter had knee surgery in Dhaka about 20 years ago, but her kneecap kept dislocating.

So he sent her to the National University Hospital to have it treated and it has been fine since.

"We have some money. Health is supreme. If you have health, you have everything."

Singapore is popular with Bangladeshis, who make up the third biggest group of foreigners seeking medical treatment here.

For example, former Bangladeshi president Iajuddin Ahmed, was flown to Singapore in 2006 where he had a successful heart bypass at Mount Elizabeth Hospital. He was then 75 years old.