

Medical tourists flock here from across Asia

Rise in numbers from India and China, and smaller nations too

■ BY POON CHIAN HUI

TRAVELLERS from across Asia are making a beeline for Singapore – not to holiday here, but to seek medical treatment.

Health-care providers say they are handling more patients from India and China, on top of traditional sources such as Indonesia and Malaysia.

Two years ago, Russia and the Middle East were identified as growing markets. Now, patients from less developed nations such as Cambodia and Mongolia are turning up on the Republic's shores in greater numbers as well, according to health-care providers.

This trend is in line with one identified by the Singapore Tourism Board in 2010, where Asia was expected to be a key player in driving the industry's growth as it recovered from the

global recession. Even back then, there were signs that more patients from India and other parts of South Asia would head here, said the agency.

Among them was Indian national Timir Patel, 48. Two years ago, with both his kidneys failing, the jeweller took a leap of faith and came here for a transplant.

"For me, it was a fresh experience because I had never travelled for medical reasons," said the Mumbai native, who had his surgery at Mount Elizabeth Hospital. His 29-year-old cousin was the donor.

"The approach to medicine here is very modern. In India, there is, for example, a tendency to over-medicate."

Many of his countrymen are also making their way here. Parkway saw a 38 per cent spike in patients from India last year compared with 2010.

Treatment for blood disorders, and kidney and liver transplants rank among the top three areas where patients seek help.

Last year, Parkway carried out about 20 such transplants on patients from India.

"Privacy and Singapore's reputation as a safe country are among the reasons Bollywood stars and wealthy businessmen choose to fly to Singapore for treatment," said Dr Lim Suet Wun, executive vice-president of Parkway's Singapore operations.

"They can relax and recover in peace, away from public attention."

He added that Parkway had seen strong growth in medical travellers from Vietnam and Myanmar as well in the past three years or so.

Meanwhile, Raffles Hospital – the other major private hospital here – received more foreign patients last year, especially from Cambodia, Myanmar, Vietnam and even Papua New Guinea.

The number from each of these countries grew 20 to 50 per cent last year compared with 2010. Most sought costly treatments for ailments such as cancer and heart disease.

Over at the Singapore Medical Group, which has 19 clinics, patients from China and India are a fast-growing group.

Chief executive Cheryl Baumann said medical tourists formed 25 per

cent of its patient base. A substantial number of Indian nationals make use of the group's obstetrics and gynaecology expertise – for example, the women sometimes fly here to give birth.

All in all, the group has served people from more than 50 countries in the past three years. Dr Baumann said the trend was not as obvious before.

Commenting on the growth in the number of patients from China and India, she said: "People in these markets have more spending power now, and they also love to travel. In addition, many feel more comfortable with the language, culture and food here, which are similar to their own."

Meanwhile, at the Asian Centre For Liver Diseases and Transplantation, more patients are now arriving from Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia and Mongolia.

It said the increase was due to the "opening up" of smaller Asian nations.

The private liver transplant centre, which has performed more than 60 such procedures in the past three years, said more than 90 per cent of its transplant patients came from abroad.

Some foreigners choose Singapore for more personal reasons. For Mr Patel, the post-operative care he received and the clean hospital environment were plus points.

"I was having transplant surgery – which would normally scare the hell out of you in India – but I felt that everything was as simple and easy as removing an appendix."

✉ chpoon@sph.com.sg