

Foreign patients coming back to S'pore

Indonesians top list; growing numbers from Bangladesh, Vietnam, Myanmar

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FOREIGN patients are flocking to Singapore hospitals again, after a decline in 2009 triggered by the global financial crisis.

About 36,000 non-resident foreign patients were either hospitalised or underwent day surgery here in 2011, Ministry of Health (MOH) figures show.

Dr Lim Suet Wun, executive vice-president of Singapore operations for the Parkway Pantai Group, said its four hospitals here are seeing "a strong steady, though single-digit, growth" since 2010.

He said the Parkway hospitals – Mount Elizabeth, Gleneagles, Parkway East and Mount Elizabeth Novena – have foreign patients coming in for a whole range of services, from health screening to complicated surgery.

Dr Lim added that while health screening costs of between \$500 to more than \$2,000 are not high, they are lucrative for Parkway as this draws in tens of thousands of foreign patients each year.

To help prospective patients plan, the group offers several hundred treatment "packages". These cover even complicated surgery such as liver transplants, giving them an idea of what they will need to pay, unless complications arise.

Indonesians continue to top the numbers list, accounting for almost half the foreign patients who come here, followed by Malaysians and patients from Bangladesh, Vietnam and Myanmar.

But Americans and Britons, who used to be among the top five nationalities coming here for serious medical treatment, are no longer among the top five nationalities of medical tourists.

Health-care experts say this shows a change in why patients come to Singapore.

A decade ago, Americans and Britons sought cheap but good medical care here.

But India, Thailand and Malaysia now give the Republic a run for its money with cataract surgery, and ballooning and stenting for blocked arteries.

Generally, medical treatments in Bangkok are 25 per cent cheaper than in Singapore.

And costs are even lower in Malaysia.

Replacing those from the United States and Britain are patients who come for what they perceive as state-of-the-art quality care that they cannot get in their home countries. These include procedures such as organ transplants and advanced cancer treatments.

Dr Lim said with economic growth in Bangladesh, Vietnam and Myanmar, some people are able to afford better care – but there is generally a lag in the development of health care, so they seek care elsewhere.

About 70 per cent of foreign patients turn to private hospitals for treatment, with 30 per cent being treated in public hospitals.

As foreigners do not enjoy any subsidy, some treatments can be cheaper in the private sector.

The majority come for general surgery and general medicine.

But in terms of specialised areas, gynaecology and cardiology – popular a decade back – have given way to eye and cancer treatments.

According to the Singapore Tourism Board, **tourists spent close to \$1 billion on medical treatments here in 2011** – an increase over the two previous years.

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