

These sectors are the supporting, yet critical, pillars that contribute to quality tourism. They ensure our industries are not only equipped with the talent capabilities in today's changing consumers needs, but also strengthen Singapore's tourism landscape as the premier destination.

Quality health care at the right price

In recent years, Mount Alvernia Hospital has increased its outreach efforts outside of Singapore, reports **NISHA RAMCHANDANI**

MOUNT Alvernia Hospital is attracting a growing number of foreign patients each year, helping to strengthen Singapore's position as a destination for medical tourism. While foreign patients account for a minority of total patient numbers, the number of foreign patients that the not-for-profit hospital treats has grown at a clip of 20 per cent annually for the last three years, which is a fairly impressive pace. Its proportion of foreign patients rose from 3 per cent in 2007 to over 5 per cent in 2010.

"Traditionally, given our mission, Mount Alvernia Hospital has focused on local patients. Over the years, the hospital has seen an increasing number of foreign patients using our services, largely through word-of-mouth publicity," says chief executive officer Khoo Chow Huat.

"Since our mission is to offer quality value-for-money health care to people, we thought it will be good for us to share our value proposition with more people. Our focus will remain with locals but for foreign patients who are looking for Singapore-quality health care at a lower cost, we offer them an option."

Mount Alvernia Hospital was first started fifty years ago by the Franciscan Missionaries of the Divine Motherhood (FMDM) to help fulfil the need for good medical facilities in Singapore.

In recent years, Mount Alvernia Hospital has increased its outreach efforts outside of Singapore, namely by organising community health talks and events overseas. It is also leveraging on popular social media platforms, such as Facebook and YouTube, so that foreign patients have easy access to information on the services offered by the private hospital.

Mount Alvernia Hospital has also set up an information centre together with overseas partners in both Indonesia and Bangladesh, two countries where a number of its foreign patients come from. In addition to those two markets, foreign patients also travel from Malaysia for a variety of specialities, including ophthalmology, gynaecology, neurology, neurosurgery, and cardiology. Mount Alvernia Hospital also has plans to launch more information centres overseas in the next two years.

But even as Singapore strives to stand out as a medical tourism hub, other countries in the region are trying to do the same. "Within Singapore, more hospitals – both private and public – are coming up. Existing hospitals are also actively expanding and upgrading themselves," notes Mr Khoo. "Within the region, Malaysia and Thailand have also been actively positioning themselves as a regional hub and are attracting foreign patients to their hospitals."

He continues: "Unlike in the past, when we were the clear choice for regional foreign patients who can afford to travel for health care, there are now more options for these patients. Nevertheless, Singapore still has a strong positioning within the medical tourism market. We will therefore have to focus on our strengths and continue to enhance them so that we remain an attractive health care destination."

Singapore's biggest advantage is that it offers high standards of healthcare, reckons Mr Khoo, adding that



In good hands: The number of foreign patients that the not-for-profit hospital treats has grown at a clip of 20% annually for the last three years

the government's efforts to boost clinical research and open more medical schools will go a long way in ensuring that Singapore maintains its edge.

Service quality – specifically in relation to infrastructure and hospitality-related service – is also another area in which Singapore excels, although this is an area where other countries can probably match Singapore in time, he warns.

The cost of manpower is also higher in Singapore when compared to other countries in the region. "We just have to make sure we continue to do things faster, better, and with empathy for patients at all times," he adds.

Mount Alvernia Hospital itself is undergoing a face-lift in phases which will see it revamping as well as expanding its facilities. For starters, the hospital's front lobby will be renovated so that it will have a bigger waiting area, a

larger retail pharmacy, a new convenience store, as well as more food and beverage offerings.

A side entrance block is also being added to the 303-bed hospital to allow for the expansion of its diagnostic imaging department, its health screening centre, and its operating theatre.

In addition, a brand new medical centre block is also being constructed, which will boost the number of medical suites under the hospital, giving it room to house more specialists. "This is important for us to become even more comprehensive as a hospital and to offer patients more choices. The block will also add more parking lots, which should help to ease the situation during peak hours," Mr Khoo says.

The hospital won Best Healthcare Experience at the 2011 Singapore Experience Awards, which is organised



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– Khoo Chow Huat, Mount Alvernia Hospital CEO

by the Singapore Tourism Board. The hospital says that it will strive to keep a strict eye on costs as well as ensure that its team of staff deliver a quality health care experience.

"We need to ensure we remain value-for-money," Mr Khoo stresses. "We do not save on equipment and professional staff as these are essential to ensure that patients get good care but we always find ways to do things more effectively and efficiently."

Meanwhile, the hospital also does its best to further develop its pool of talent, such as by increasing the number of sponsorships each year for staff attending degree or diploma courses and overseas attachments. "We will continue to look for more specialists to join us at the hospital to make ourselves more comprehensive and also to offer our patients more choices," Mr Khoo adds.