Malaysia Healthcare Travel Council (MHTC) – Mary Wong Lai Lin, CEO



15.09.2014

Tags: medical tourism, promotion, government

Malaysia Healthcare Travel Council's CEO is proud of her country's healthcare system and their efforts at attracting medical tourists from all over the world, with the support of the healthcare NKEA and the government's efforts to become a reference in healthcare worldwide.

Medical tourism has been a national priority for the past three years, especially since it has been under the Healthcare NKEA. What has been the importance of this program, and what have been your main priorities over the past three years?

Medical tourism is definitely one industry where Malaysia can provide for the global community: we have a very good healthcare system, and we have very well trained doctors and specialists. I would say Malaysia has all it takes to make itself a very good medical tourism destination. The problem is that the world does not know about it.

For the past two to three years we have been engaged in branding Malaysia, and showcasing the country as an alternative for people seeking healthcare outside of their country. We organized programs to bring the awareness of Malaysia to the world—we organize exhibitions and trade shows, and we work with different stakeholders in different parts of the world, engaging them and

letting them know that Malaysia is a destination. We also work with our tourism board here in Malaysia and we collaborate to brand Malaysia as a medical tourism destination.

Malaysia suffers from a lack of qualified specialist doctors. How do you see this influencing the quality of healthcare provided, especially for specialty operations, for example?

As far as the training for specialties is concerned, it's a purview of the Ministry of Health because the ministry is in a better position—they actually offer scholarships for doctors who want to pursue a specialty or sub-specialty course. We train more than 1,500 new specialists a year, and at the same time, a lot of doctors and specialists from Malaysia have done their specialties in different parts of the world so they can be a good source of training for younger doctors here.

Is MHTC participating in any way in attracting international doctors here to Malaysia?

Malaysia has liberalized medical services and we allow foreign specialists to work in Malaysia, but of course they have to meet the requirements of the Malaysian Medical Council (MMC), which has certain conditions before any foreign doctor is allowed to practice here. So as long as they fulfill the MMC criteria, I don't think there is a problem for any Malaysian hospitals to engage foreign specialists.

There are two types of brain drain taking place right here in Malaysia: from the public sector to the private sector, and from Malaysia to other countries. How do you think this issue can be contained today?

At least with brain drain from the public sector to the private sector, doctors remain in Malaysia: they are still practicing and serving the public here, including medical tourists. Whether it's the public sector or private, it's fine with us— people are free to choose between working in the public or private sectors.

With doctors leaving to work in Singapore, it is difficult to stop people from taking such decisions: Singapore pays higher than Malaysia, and as a result, a large percentage of doctors in Singapore today are Malaysians. One way that we can stop this flow, and even encourage them to move back is medical tourism, which can provide good opportunities for these doctors, and better remuneration.

Despite rising investments in new hospitals, there is still a deficit of 10,000 hospital beds to cope with demand. Do you think this is achievable?

The government is currently giving incentives to hospitals to upgrade their facilities as well as for investors to build new facilities, but I strongly believe in the advancement in clinical science in Malaysia as a way to tackle the deficit of beds—we do a lot of minimally invasive procedures and services, which means we don't need long stays in the hospital. Even a heart bypass can be done within a day and in the next two days the patient can be discharged. So we are not talking about needing too many beds to build capacity. We are doing a lot of procedures on a daily basis—eye surgery, spinal surgery and knee replacement are done in a minimally invasive way.

Is there a specific area in terms of medical procedures where Malaysia can really be the specialist and attract specific patients?

You'd be surprised that the top two or three procedures don't require a long procedure: even spinal surgery can be completed within 20 minutes and the patient can be discharged the next day. We see a lot of minimally invasive surgeries being done in Malaysia, and that is good because you don't need a long stay in the hospital. Of course, a very popular treatment sought right now is cardiac care. A lot of patients come to Malaysia for angiogram, angioplasty and even bypass surgery. So it depends on the procedures but Malaysia is really popular for minimally invasive surgeries, and more than 80 percent of our surgeons do minimally invasive procedures, which is very good.

In terms of international patients, whom are you targeting at the moment and where do they mostly come from?

Most of our patients come from Indonesia because of its proximity to Malaysia, as well as the cultural and language similarities: we receive more than 50 percent of our patients from Indonesia. The rest come from English-speaking countries like the UK, the US, and Australia. We have a consistently large number of English-speaking patients because Malaysia is predominantly an English speaking country and you can move around here without any problems. All of our hospitals—the doctors, the staff—can all speak English. We also have patients from countries even like India, Japan, China and Bangladesh. In the Middle East, we work with countries like Libya, Iran and Saudi Arabia, and we have a large number of patients now coming from Singapore.

A lot of American patients go to Mexico, so why would an American patient go to Malaysia?

Cost is definitely one of the factors. Besides this, is the combination of medical procedure with tourism. For example, heart bypass in the US is exorbitantly high—USD 140,000—whereas over here in Malaysia you can do the same procedure for about USD 10,000-15,000, so it's a fraction of

what they pay in the US. At the same time, a lot of Americans come here to have a holiday with their family, which is good because it's an experience that they want.

So, why is Malaysia the preferred destination for medical tourism and healthcare quality?

When people travel for medical procedures they want to go to a place where they are sure that the quality is there. Malaysia provides one of the top quality healthcare services in the world because our doctors and specialists are well trained with mainly trained in the US, the UK, and Australia. Secondly, we have very good facilities, and good equipment. Finally, in addition to all this, the price is right! You can also have a good holiday here—our amenities in Malaysia, the five-star hotels here compared to Singapore and even Thailand, are reasonable. So if you want to have a good holiday, a good experience, and good quality care, Malaysia is the obvious choice. Malaysia is a jewel, it's untapped. People do not know about it. That's why we say, "discovering the jewel in medical tourism in Malaysia," because people do not really know about us. But I believe that if we maintain this momentum, in a very short time Malaysia will be the destination of choice for medical tourism for patients from all around the world.

What will MHTC's priorities be for the next three to five years?

We want to make ourselves known to the industry players in the medical tourism area. For example, people in the banking industry, the medical insurance industry, MNCs who are looking at the benefits for their employees and even health facilitators are the people we would like to engage and connect with. It is slow but I believe that it is coming along and by 2020 our target is to have 1.9 million international patients. What we are saying here is if you want to get value for money, Malaysia is your choice.

To read more articles and interviews from Malaysia, and to download the latest free report on the country, click here.

See more interviews