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Sherene Azli, CEO of the Malaysia Healthcare Travel Council (MHTC), introduces this unique organization in charge of promoting Malaysia internationally as the "Cardiology and Fertility Hub of Asia" and explains the advantages of receiving medical treatment in Malaysia.

What have been the Malaysia Healthcare Travel Council (MHTC)'s main priorities since its creation in 2009?

Malaysia began developing the healthcare travel scene in the early 2000s. Seeing its potential to contribute to the nation's GDP, the government set up the Malaysia Healthcare Travel Council (MHTC) in 2009 to facilitate and promote the country's healthcare travel service offerings under the brand "Malaysia Healthcare" with the intended goal of making Malaysia the leading global healthcare destination. Since 2012, we have expanded our presence in neighbouring countries such as Indonesia where we set up the Malaysia Healthcare Representative Office (MHRO) as well as China, India, Indonesia, Vietnam and Myanmar where we established key partnerships to better answer the needs of healthcare travellers.

As a unique organization in Malaysia, our main goal is to establish Malaysia as the leading global destination for healthcare and to promote Malaysia Healthcare globally. In this regard, MHTC and partner hospitals are participating in large-scale international health and healthcare travel branding and marketing initiatives around the world, as well as organizing healthcare travel roadshows and events in our focus markets. We are also strongly marketing Malaysia on digital platforms as well as leveraging our network, partnerships and expatriates' communities in Malaysia to spread awareness of Malaysia Healthcare's offerings. Ultimately, we want to facilitate the healthcare industry's sustainability.

Thanks to MHTC's active work, Malaysia has been awarded "Destination of the Year" for healthcare travel from 2015 to 2017 by the International Medical Travel Journal (IMTJ). International Living also acknowledged Malaysia as the country with the "Best Country in the World for Healthcare" based on their Global Retirement Index from 2015 to 2017. Over the few decades, we managed to place Malaysia at the eighth position worldwide for healthcare travel. By following the trend, it is expected that by 2030, 93 percent of international patients will be treated in Asia and we want Malaysia to be a part of this growth. In 2017, Malaysia Healthcare achieved approximately RM 1.3 billion in hospital revenue receipts from more than one million healthcare traveller arrivals. This growth contributed almost RM three-four billion to the country's GDP.

What are the key assets that make Malaysia the destination of choice for healthcare travel?

Malaysia has several unique selling points which set us apart from our regional competitors and invites healthcare travellers to *Experience Malaysia Healthcare, Embrace Malaysian Hospitality*. Firstly, we offer world-class quality healthcare facilities and services. Malaysia houses 200 private facilities, not including dental clinics and health and wellness centres, where quality and safety standards are exemplary, benchmarked against the best in the world, and are closely monitored and stringently regulated by the Ministry of Health.

Moreover, the country's healthcare system is internationally recognised for its excellence and its affordability. Healthcare travellers do not need to worry about burning a hole in their pockets when seeking treatment in Malaysia. The cost of treatment is affordable compared to countries within the region thanks to the capping of charges and compared to the USA, patients can save up to 85 percent in cost, according to Patient Beyond Borders.

In addition, it is relatively easy to communicate with healthcare professionals in the country as English and Malay are widely spoken, plus translators are easily available for standard Chinese dialects and Indian languages. It is also strategically situated on international travel routes and is incredibly well connected to all major travel hubs from around the world. Malaysia is home to over 30 million population of various ethnic backgrounds, diverse culture, with a myriad of popular tourist destination spots.

MHTC made sure that the country could offer an End-to-End patient experience, which is our core value offering. Indeed, Malaysia offers a seamless experience for healthcare travellers, aiding them from point of inquiry in their home country to their arrival and successful treatment, as well as their return home, with an excellent post-care call centre, concierge and lounge service at the Malaysian international airport, KLIA. MHTC has also established representatives in its core markets (Indonesia, Vietnam, Myanmar, China and most recently, India) to increase accessibility for healthcare travellers.

As a result, the industry is growing at an average rate between 16-17 percent every year against a global average of 12-14 percent every year. This double-digit growth is based on revenue gained from private healthcare providers alone. Therefore, healthcare travel is one of the fastest growing industries in the export and services sector, recording double-digit growth, as compared to the four percent growth recorded by the tourism industry alone.

How is the country differentiating itself from its regional competitors such as Thailand or Singapore?

Regional players such as Thailand and Singapore have had a 20-year head-start but Malaysia has done well in playing catch up. When we analysed what the demand in healthcare travel would be and the needs of international patients, we noticed the rise of non-communicable diseases as well as the relaxation of the one-child policy in China. Therefore, we decided that cardiology and fertility were the good areas for Malaysia to focus on and we want to establish Malaysia as the Cardiology and Fertility Hub of Asia. This helps us differentiate the country from our neighbours and anchors our success as we have the track record to prove. Many stakeholders are also working towards these specific therapeutic areas.

Becoming the cardiology hub of Asia is a very clear statement for Malaysia, thanks to our National Heart Institute which has been perceived as the John Hopkins of Asia, where even our 93-year-old Prime Minister, Prime Minister, YAB Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohammad, has been treated and is now

actively running the country. Such a successful institution helps us push the cardiology agenda to the world. In Fertility, we had also good results in Malaysia that were surpassed those of our neighbours. There is a friendly competition with Singapore and Thailand, but Malaysia is now gaining momentum as we offer a more holistic end-to-end patient experience while having extremely attractive prices for the high-quality of our services.

What challenges and opportunities do you see in developing healthcare travel in Malaysia?

We have experienced limitations in building awareness as penetrating into foreign countries present unique challenges. We have also seen, like most government organizations, budget limitations which is a challenge to stretch for international marketing. The weakened local RM translates into higher cost for international promotion which is in USD.

However, we know that the expansion of healthcare infrastructure is imperative to meet the increasing number of healthcare travellers and to cater to the demand for more luxurious and patient-centric facilities. Therefore, we have seen many of our partners expanding their infrastructure. Technology is an instrumental part of meeting the demand for higher quality and speedy services so most of the private medical centres are also looking at bringing advanced medical equipment such as radiation machine or an electronic medical records system.

How important are the government support and private partnerships to the operations of MHTC?

Malaysia's healthcare system is dichotomous with a heavily subsidised public sector, reserved for Malaysian citizens, and the private sector, providing comparatively more luxurious and speedy services serving Malaysian patients and healthcare travellers. The development of the private sector is vital to support the public sector and healthcare travel enables the private sector to grow and complement to the public sector. Therefore, Malaysia is one of the few countries in the world where healthcare travel is a government supported industry while being driven by the private sector. Our public-private partnership helped us grow faster and more steadily over the last years while maintaining the Malaysian prices of healthcare services. Indeed, we do not want to be charging more for our services because we want healthcare travel to help drive the growth of our private healthcare system.

Moreover, MHTC is a very unique organization that has been successful thanks to our clear agenda and our focus on key goals for the country. Through MHTC, the government provides support to private healthcare facilities through policies and tax exemptions. To facilitate industry growth, MHTC also maintains close ties with the Association of Private Hospitals of Malaysia, as the main driver of the private healthcare sector in Malaysia and to encourage participation from the industry, MHTC has introduced memberships for private hospitals in Malaysia, counting now 79 members. In addition, Malaysia Healthcare has international partnerships with numerous industry players from travel agencies, healthcare facilitators and airlines in various countries in the Asian region and within our target markets.

What are your main objectives for MHTC in the upcoming three years?

Our first objective is to promote Malaysia as the Asian Hub for Fertility & Cardiology. Over the years, Malaysia has received high demand for fertility and cardiology treatments, especially from within our current focus countries. Thus, we need to anchor on Malaysia's medical excellence in these niche specialities moving forward. As the driving force behind healthcare travel in Malaysia, Malaysia Healthcare is celebrating the importance of both health and wellness with our first ever campaign, Malaysia Year of Healthcare Travel 2020 (MYHT2020). This initiative intends to propel Malaysia to the world stage as a reputable global healthcare travel destination, as well as to increase the economic impact contributed by both the health and tourism sectors. Leading up to MYHT 2020, we have an ongoing campaign, Medical Travel Media Awards, and an upcoming campaign, Share My Experience, to build awareness on Malaysia Healthcare.

Aside from the promotion activities of MHTC, we are also looking at strengthening our local and regional healthcare travel ecosystem through long-term development within the industry. Therefore, we have established insigHT, Malaysia's leading medical travel market intelligence conference. insigHT was formed to provide a forum for thought leaders and medical travel experts to collaborate, innovate and share knowledge to foster the development of the industry and to create new connections and lasting opportunities.

What would be your final message on behalf of MHTC?

From a hidden jewel to a treasured destination, Malaysia has become a haven for healthcare and travel, offering world-class quality, easy accessibility and competitive affordability to healthcare travellers. Malaysia Healthcare offers a complete medical package with equipped medical facilities, a pharmaceutical industry which ensures competitive pricing to maintain our cost advantage within the region and highly skilled and qualified medical professionals among others. With all the right ingredients to cater to the needs of patients far away from home, Malaysia Healthcare offers *Quality Care for Your Peace of Mind*. On that note, I warmly invite you to *Experience Malaysia Healthcare* and *Embrace Malaysian Hospitality*.

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