

K-health the new wave from S. Korea?

Clinics and hospitals target medical tourists from S'pore and the region

By POON CHIAN HUI

MEDICAL clinics and hospitals in South Korea are on a major drive to woo foreign patients, including those from Singapore and the region.

They are joined by medical travel agencies, "book a doctor" portals and hotels, which are tying up with the clinics to offer their guests lower treatment rates.

The effort, however, will not be a walk in the park, said industry insiders in South Korea, because Singapore, as an established medical tourism destination, will pose keen competition.

Singapore Tourism Board figures show foreigners spent about \$1 billion on medical treatments here in 2011.

And last year, about 850,000 travellers are said to have visited Singapore for medical reasons, according to global market research firm Frost & Sullivan.

This is far more than the 156,000 medical tourists South Korea received last year.

Although that is more than double the 60,000 who went to the country in 2009, the industry is still considered "very small", admitted Korea Tourism Organisation's (KTO) Han Eun Ji when The Straits Times visited Seoul last week to view some of its medical facilities. "We are trying to diversify beyond plastic surgery, for example, to dental care and medical check-ups," said the assistant manager for medical tourism.

Mr Kim Chinsol, who works at



A patient undergoing facial acupuncture at Kwangdong Oriental Hospital in Seoul. Industry insiders in South Korea say Singapore, as an established medical tourism destination, will pose keen competition. PHOTO: KWANGDONG ORIENTAL HOSPITAL

the strategy office of Goyang City, said the city's medical centres face a "slim chance" of attracting foreigners when pitted against Singapore.

Only 468 Singaporeans visited Korea for medical services in 2011, said KTO's Singapore office.

In fact, medical appointment websites like SacuraLife observe that more patients are heading to Singapore for cosmetic surgery than there are Singaporeans heading to Korea for the same.

Mr Wu Zhijian, director of Woodsford Health which runs the Singapore-based Web portal, said the long travel time to Seoul is an obstacle. "Singaporeans may not want to travel for eight hours just for a three-hour procedure."

Aesthetic doctor Harold Ma,

who runs a practice at East Coast Road, said foreigners are drawn by the high standards of health care.

Dr Tan Ying Chien, a plastic surgeon at Novena Medical Centre, said language is another Singapore advantage, as most South Korean doctors may not be fluent in English. "Even with an interpreter, things can very often be lost in translation," he added.

However, Mr Kim believes the K-Pop wave and the growing popularity of South Korean celebrities in Asia will boost the country's medical tourism business.

This confidence has led many clinics and hospitals in Korea to invest time and money to woo foreigners, a move that gathered steam after regulatory changes in

2009 allowed state-licensed clinics and hospitals to promote their services to foreigners.

The medical sector is not without help. A Seoul hotel from the Marriott chain has signed contracts with clinics to give guests a discount of up to 15 per cent. Several medical travel agencies, like Hyundai Medis, get money from the Korean government for promotional activities.

Quick response is one advantage Korea has over Singapore, according to Singapore-based "book a doctor" website DocDoc, as top local doctors are often very busy.

Its chief marketing officer Jon Samsel said: "In Korea, you can set up appointments with top surgeons more easily."

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Before you fly...

FAST facts for a medical traveller to South Korea

IN 2012

About 156,000 medical tourists visited South Korea. People from China, the United States, Russia and Japan led the way. The top five services foreign patients bought were:

- Internal medicine
- Health screening
- Dermatology
- Plastic surgery
- Obstetrics and gynaecology

HOT SPOTS

Seoul and nearby Gyeonggi province treat more than 70 per cent of the foreign patients. Busan is next. In Seoul, 154 dermatology clinics, 319 plastic surgery clinics and 317 dental clinics take in foreign patients.

PRECAUTIONS

The Korea Tourism Organization recommends taking these steps:

- Find out if the hospital or clinic is registered with the Korean government.
- Before flying there, get in touch with a coordinator who speaks your language.
- Check the receipt or invoice, preferably before the procedure.

Unsatisfactory service may be reported to the Korea Medical Dispute Mediation and Arbitration Agency.

Source: Korea Tourism Organization

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