



A prescription for Bengaluru

MS Guru Prasad, GM, international marketing, Narayana Health, Dr Ajay Bakshi, managing director & CEO, Manipal Health Enterprises, and Hari S Boolchandani, head, international business, Sakra World Hospital, opine on the potential of Bengaluru to become a medical tourism hub



How can Bengaluru become India's top medical tourism destination? What strategies need to be in place to achieve this?

Hari: Bengaluru is a well-established and an ever growing city, both in terms of general infrastructure and healthcare facilities. It houses some of the biggest healthcare brands which are expanding capacities to cater to the increasing regional and international demands. The city has a cosmopolitan culture, the increasing connectivity with the world and the moderate climate are playing to the advantage as well.

The other major advantage is lower costs, as compared to north Indian hospitals. We have noticed a major shift in focus of Bengaluru hospitals towards the international markets in recent years. These hospitals need to keep this aggression on and deliver some good results in terms of healthcare delivery and in no time if not no 1, it will surely become one of the top three medical travel destinations in India.

Dr Ajay: For Bengaluru to become India's top medical tourism destination, most of the fundamentals are in place: the connectivity, cost, weather and brand awareness on Bengaluru, choice of healthcare providers

The strategies deployed by providers are to locate niche and closer markets that will offer patient inflow into the city. Markets that are price sensitive also a good league to be targeted. State initiatives if it can have a regulatory to address the challenges of medical travellers and their stake holders will be a good start.

Guru: Bengaluru is already recognised as one of the best cities to live in India. In order to achieve the status of medical tourism destination, the city is to have the best connectivity from various regions of the world like Africa, Middle East and CIS countries. The state's responsibility is to provide the best infrastructure like tourist guides, better roads, traffic free signals, theft free shopping places, etc.

Your hospital being a key player in the region, what is your contribution in developing this sector? How are you positioning yourself to attract international traffic?

Hari: We are a comparatively new player in the market and started our efforts in the international markets around a year back only. In the short time period, however, we have grown the international business six fold. We have adopted a multi-pronged approach to attract international patient flow through different channels. We are simultaneously working on directly approaching some markets in Africa, South East Asia and Middle East Asia and, at the same time, working with medical travel companies based locally as well as abroad. We are also developing the on line model to attract international

patients traffic.

Dr Ajay: To sustain the growth and quality of service for this segment, various initiatives have been put in place by Manipal Hospital:

- One stop solution for all needs of international patients are in place.
- Process approved by international quality organisations are being deployed to ensure a smoother and hassle free client experience.

Manipal, being one of the oldest players in healthcare, has for its merit the clinicians who have proven their skills on most advanced treatment options with superlative outcomes on par with international healthcare providers. This will be our position in attracting international patients seeking treatment for complicated or advanced clinical ailments.

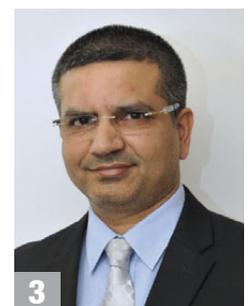
Guru: We are travelling across the MENA region to promote our hospital services through marketing. We are reaching out to every potential hospital in the region for possible tie-ups and joint ventures. Our continuation is immense for this industry as we are training several staffs and doctors from Africa and the Middle East. We have also handled many complicated cases from this region.

What are the challenges that you foresee that is hindering the growth in the region. What is the role of the operators and facilitators in the trade?

Hari: Bengaluru has been seeing better than ever growth in recent years in attracting medical travelers and I don't see that changing. While each and every hospital would like to get majority of patients 'walk-in' directly due to brand or doctor pull, the truth remains that majority of us still get a huge percentage of our patients via medical travel operators and facilitators. I look at them as one of the important channel partners and they are here to stay. The only caution that the hospitals need to take is not to go overboard with their offerings to this group as in the long term it can lead to either price inflation and/or erosion into hospital margins.

Dr Ajay: The main challenge is the lack of a central and neutral body that can regulate and arbitrate the needs of different stake holders in this segment. Also, another factor that's hindering is the lack of information on the data as well as evidence based information on the outcomes.

The facilitators are a key part of MVT. Today, the associates have evolved into a more organised and established setup offering better patient advocacy for the hospitals. But given the scenario where facilitators mostly represent individual firms than the primary care providers, the risk of them not having a proper process and quality to deliver the care for the patients



1. MS Guru Prasad

2. Hari S Boolchandani

3. Dr Ajay Bakshi



might hamper the role of a facilitator. This again can be addressed by the type of facilitators that every hospital choose to empanel with.

Guru: The main challenges that we see in this industry are the non-co-operation from the governmental sector in terms of issuing visas and infrastructural development. We also wanted the government to join hands with us in improving the air traffic to various parts of India to access the medical facilities which are not happening. It is almost 23% growth in the numbers of patients coming to Bengaluru on year on year basis but we do not have a single flights from Africa that flies directly into our destination.

Across the globe, from which regions are you getting a chunk of international patients?

Hari: We get majority of our patients from the middle-eastern countries at the moment. Africa and South East Asia have also started contributing somewhat.

Dr Ajay: Most of the patients come from Middle East and SE Asia, followed by Africa. About 55% of the patients are from SE Asia, followed by 30% from ME and the remaining from Africa.

Guru: We are getting more patients from Bangladesh, the

Middle East and East Africa.

What is the right approach in building an effective and sustainable international patient programme?

Hari: Initially, start working on all channels of Direct, HCF, Institutional, Web etc simultaneously and gradually shift greater concentration to direct/ patient to patient referral channels. And, of course, deliver excellent patient care and treatment results.

Dr Ajay: Building an international programme with following guidelines will be the right approach. Hospital-based marketing than doctor-based marketing. Also, focus on building sustaining channels of growth than dependency on one or two channels and international programme where patients get aware of the facility directly in proportionate to associate referred will be a good option for the hospital brand.

Guru: Sustainable international patient programme can be built on the trust between both the partners. The referring hospital and the treating hospital should have a give and take relationship in order to sustain for the longer run. One of the ways is that the treating doctors should be willing to extend their skills to the referring doctors in terms of exchange program thereby, it can live up to a long term relationship.