

Healthy PROFITS

As the diseases of poverty disappear in Singapore, the diseases of affluence taken their place. Sunuja Naidu looks at the changing nature of healthcare - and the standards patients now expect



William Chong at the Pacific Healthcare Group's operating theatre, the only private clinic to have one

As you stroll into Pacific Healthcare Holdings' latest clinic on the 20th floor of Paragon, a sense of grandeur surrounds you. You are greeted by an extravagant white chaise longue with gold trimmings. In another area, a Jacuzzi in a corner hints at luxurious pampering. The new space is a maternity spa-cum-wellness lounge-cum-cosmetic surgery and gynaecological clinic, although all three are distinctly demarcated and occupy different parts of the penthouse. Is luxury the new face of medicine in Singapore?

With rising incomes come rising expectations. Well-heeled patients today are willing to pay for quality and that includes being treated in environments that resemble six-star hotels. Take Camden Medical Centre, which is located on busy Orchard Boulevard. The white and plate-glass building was designed by renowned architect Richard Meier and houses practices ranging from plastic surgery to hair loss treatments as well as Pilates and a medical spa. Set

amid elegant landscaping with open lobby spaces, the building exudes sophistication. Plastic surgeon Dr Woffles Wu, who runs a practice there, calls it a "lux lifestyle building," which caters to "anyone who is discriminating about lifestyle." It also, he feels, attracts doctors who are mavericks.

Medicine these days is indeed morphing into a different animal: and with good reason. Dr

Many patients, these days, go to see doctors about "lifestyle diseases"

William Chong, managing director of Pacific Healthcare Holdings, points out that unlike the health problems of 20 years ago, many diseases of recent times are "lifestyle-related." He says, "In Singapore, today, we are fortunate that there are far fewer incidences of diseases of the poor, so to speak, like malnutrition, dysentery. We have moved to diseases of the affluent, which are diet-

related, such as colorectal cancer, diabetes and heart disease." Many patients, these days, go to see doctors about "lifestyle diseases" such as obesity, weight control, stress, hair loss, erectile dysfunction and acne.

"The reality is that there are patients who seek relief from stressful environments - that's why we have a spa as well," he says. He asks cheekily, "How does a pregnant woman cut her toe-nails?" and answers, "It is a physically impossible act." With the new maternity spa, pedicures and other kinds of pampering services will ensure that mothers emerge looking none the worse for having been through nine months of pregnancy. He emphasises, however, that the group's investment in the spa is only 40 percent. Its partner is Haach. "We are not planning to expand into the spa business," he stresses.

The medical profession may display a degree of conservatism when it comes to associating itself with wellness but Singapore is undeniably becoming well-known for the "softer" areas of medicine such as cosmetic surgery. Chong's colleague,

plastic surgeon Dr Martin Huang, who practises at the new Paragon facility, attracts a large proportion of foreign clientele, as does Wu.

However, the complex areas of medicine have not been neglected. One of the largest players in the region is The Parkway Group Healthcare, which manages Mount Elizabeth Hospital – with 505 beds, one of the largest private hospitals in Asia – as well as Gleneagles Hospital and East Shore Hospital. The group sees its niche in “cutting edge, complex operations.” Its managing

Right: Dr Dominic Er stands in front of his eight-slice PET scan

Below: Dr Waffles Wu brings some light-hearted touches to his clinic decor

Bottom: The three hospitals that belong to the Parkway Healthcare Group (clockwise from bottom): East Shore Hospital, Gleneagles Hospital and Mount Elizabeth Hospital



“With this business model, we are no longer worried about price wars”

director, Dr Lim Cheok Peng, says, “We have doctors who are pioneers in their respective fields, such as in living-donor liver transplant, stem cell transplant, cardiology and many others.”

Regarding itself as the market leader in Singapore, the group engages top-quality expertise. Its three hospitals in Singapore collectively perform the largest number of cardiac surgeries and near-surgeries in the private healthcare sector in the region. Lim feels that while some hospitals have turned to “lifestyle medicine” such as botox injections to reduce wrinkles and lasik surgery for the improvement of eyesight, the treatment of life-threatening illnesses would continue to be the main draw for patients from overseas.

At the same time, the group has not ignored the finer touches. Enter Mount Elizabeth Hospital and you can avail yourself of the refinements of a five-star hotel, such as concierge and butler services. Lim says, “This helps a patient feel more at ease and aids in his recovery process when he feels he is not in a typical hospital environment.”

These value-added services will probably become more the norm as Singapore seeks to become a medical leader in the region. Doctors, to a certain extent, will need to reinvent themselves. This is already being seen as more doctors turn entrepreneurs and set up their own medical centres.

One such medical professional is Dr Dominic Er who, together with Dr Lim Cheok Peng and Dr Djeng Shih Kien, orchestrated a reverse takeover of a public-listed injection mould maker and turned it into a healthcare company, AsiaMedic. After performing the private sector’s first kidney transplant between spouses, Er was ready for a new challenge and decided to go into corporate medicine. Corporate medicine, he says, is about bringing benefits to the patients by



exploring medicine in the corporate sense: developing medical facilities, putting in capital, running the practice, making sure cash flow is generated. “Returns can be reinvested into forefront technology to benefit doctors and patients.”

AsiaMedic provides ambulatory healthcare services in radiology

and diagnostic imaging, ophthalmology, cosmetic surgery and health screening. Through a network of affiliated physicians and surgeons, the group provides integrated healthcare delivery systems.

For Er, being a businessman-doctor poses no conflict. “Doctors know what is best for the patient,” he points out. “In that way, we can save costs.” Good management in healthcare, he feels, is key to creating a medical system that works

efficiently and effectively. "We are fortunate in Singapore to have talented people in government and a good infrastructure. Similarly, in medicine, we need good management." His previous experiences as general manager of Gleneagles Hospital and director of Gleneagles Dialysis International in partnership with the Parkway Healthcare Group make him well placed to run a private medical practice and make sound investments.

AsiaMedic boasts several firsts: from the region's first Positron Emission Tomography (PET) scan for early cancer detection to Singapore's first conductive keratoplasty, a vision-correction procedure that uses radio waves. After incurring losses in the first three years, Er has managed to turn the company around. In the first six months of last year, AsiaMedic generated a pre-tax profit of \$612,000.

Er views the competition in the region for

"There are only three such machines in Singapore," he reveals proudly. Er is also excited about the next equipment he will be acquiring for AsiaMedic – a 64-slice computed tomography scanner which will help speed up the diagnosis for coronary heart disease without discomfort of an invasive procedure.

Parkway Healthcare Group has set up a Haematology and Stem Cell Transplant centre. The first ever in private healthcare in Southeast Asia, it is established as a cost-effective and viable option to seeking treatment for blood disorders and blood cancers in the West. Parkway has also opened a Korean clinic in Singapore, in partnership with Andong General Hospital of Korea, to cater to the medical needs of the Korean community. Even government-restructured hospital Tan Tock

India's leading healthcare provider. With another two hospitals in Malaysia and four in Indonesia, Parkway has a total of seven hospitals outside of Singapore. The Pacific Healthcare Group has a 7,500 sq ft centre in Hong Kong, which offers dental, medical and cosmetic surgical services and is building a women's and children's hospital in Hyderabad, India, while AsiaMedic feels it is now ready for merger and acquisition deals in Australia and China. Owing to the nature of its hair loss



"medical tourists" with equanimity. "With leading-edge technology and expertise, we can provide specialist care for patients in Singapore and the region. With this business model, we are no longer worried about price wars."

With the escalating cost of healthcare, questions about the way medical practices choose to allocate their expenditure are not out of line. At the same time, the reality is that different practices target different clientele. There is a range of healthcare systems in the country, from private hospitals to government-restructured hospitals, to cater to a diverse range of patients. Both Er and Chong point out that they are aiming at niche markets.

In the quest to be competitive regionwide, there is a need to have the latest cutting-edge technology. This is something many of the private hospitals here are aware of and strive to attain. Chong, a practising dentist, waxes lyrical about the cutting-edge dental facility at his Wisma Atria practice – also part of the Pacific Healthcare Group – which provides computer-generated fillings via CAD-CAM design.

Seng has acquired Intralase lasik surgery, a breakthrough lasik technology that it claims is safer, blade-less and more precise. It is the first and only hospital that offers Intralase for myopia and astigmatism correction in Singapore. This year, the renowned Johns Hopkins Hospital will move its state-of-the-art oncology unit from the National University Hospital to Tan Tock Seng Hospital, giving the hospital an edge in becoming a world-class oncology service provider. The new Electro Hair Regeneration Centre at Camden Medical Centre, established by Dr Eugene Hong, is also a pioneer: it is the first in the region to offer a proven therapeutic option using electrostatic pulses for treating male-pattern baldness. The treatment has also been recommended for those undergoing chemotherapy.

Apart from that, many of the hospitals are also spreading their wings overseas. Early last year, Parkway opened a new hospital in India – the Apollo Gleneagles Hospital in Calcutta – in a joint venture with Apollo Enterprises,

treatment, which requires sustained follow-ups, the Electro Hair Regeneration Centre is already planning to set up clinics in Malaysia, Australia, Hong Kong and Japan.

In today's economic climate, it is perhaps inevitable that medicine has come to be considered a profit-generating industry, and one that has the potential to add considerably to the country's economic growth: medical groups need to balance patients' needs with business interests. Er says, "The most important cost is the cost of life. And the pain and suffering people go through. As a doctor, you have to look at the mathematics of it, to bring in the best technology for the best outcome." □



This photo: The hood over Dr Eugene Hong transmits electrostatic pulsed energy to the scalp

Left: Service is emphasised at Mount Elizabeth Hospital