

# SANGEETHA CHENGAPPA

With over fourteen years of varied experience in the fields of Sales, Marketing and Communication, Sangeetha Chengappa began her career as a journalist in 1996 with Express Computer where she covered corporate turnarounds, new technologies and policy issues in the IT industry. She then worked with The New Indian Express and Deccan Herald in Bangalore. She recently joined Deccan Chronicle as a Senior Correspondent. While at the Deccan Herald, as part of the Business bureau, her work involved news reportage on Consumer, Service and Manufacturing sectors. Sangeetha also closely tracked marketing trends and the entrepreneurial spirit.

Sangeetha won The PoleStar Award titled, 'Jury's Special Recognition', for 2006 for her articles: 'Move over IT and BT, make room for MT' and 'Can Academia bail out Industry from manpower shortage?', that appeared in Deccan Herald.

# MOVE OVER IT AND BT, MAKE ROOM FOR MT

Low cost, critical medical services available in India are encouraging people from abroad to get treated here. Bangalore is gaining ground as a preferred destination for medical tourism (MT). Sangeetha Chengappa explains why....

After scripting a success story in Information Technology, the land of spirituality and yoga is readying itself to enter a dream run in Medical Tourism. India is poised to become one of the key players in Medical Tourism, with its unbeatable cost advantage coupled with world-class medical treatment. The repertoire of services on offer in the country spans “wellness” care, alternative systems of medicine like ayurveda, homoeopathy and unani, cosmetic surgery and most important, advanced life saving healthcare. Medical Tourism refers to movement of patients to the country providing the service for diagnosis and treatment. Five years ago, just 10,000 foreign patients visited India for medical treatment.

Today, India is emerging as one of the key hubs for life saving and healthcare, with close to 1,00,000 foreign patients coming in every year, giving competing countries like Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, South Africa, Cuba and Jordan a run for their money. A recent joint study by the CII and McKinsey reveals that the Indian healthcare industry is expected to attract more than 3,00,000 patients by the end of 2006. By 2012, medical tourism is estimated to rake in \$2 billion. India’s growth potential is limited by the fact that domestic demand for healthcare exceeds supply, therefore limiting the number of foreign patients that can be attended to. In most of the cases, the percentage of foreign patients taken in by Indian hospitals

does not exceed 10 per cent. Patient profile of the patients who throng to India belong to three distinct categories. There are approximately 20 million non-residential Indians across the world who drive the demand for low cost healthcare, combined with a trip back home. The second category are patients from countries with underdeveloped facilities like Nepal, Burma, Bangladesh, African, Middle Eastern and Latin American countries who flock to India to avail of quality healthcare at affordable rates. The third category of patients come from developed countries with an aging population like US, UK and Canada where the long waiting period for life saving surgeries which are exorbitantly priced drive them into seeking healthcare in India.

## Cost factor

“Increasingly, patients from Europe and America are choosing India for critical medical treatment. While the average cost of cardiac or orthopaedic surgeries are upwards of \$25,000 abroad, the patient pays little over \$7,500 here in India, including airfare, medical treatment and a one-week stay at a hill-station before flying back home,” pointed out Vishal Bali, CEO of Wockhardt Hospitals Ltd. According to a Business World India and Indian Brand Equity Foundation report, the most important factor that drives medical tourism to India is its low cost advantage. Majority of foreign patients visit India primarily to avail of “First World Service at Third World Cost”. While a bone marrow transplant would cost \$400,000 in the US and \$62,500 in Thailand, the same would cost \$30,000 in India. A knee surgery costing \$16,000 in the US and \$7,000 in Thailand would cost only \$4,500 in

India. “The fixed package rates that we offer for life saving surgery makes it transparent and easy for foreigners to make a trip to India, as they end up spending one fifth of what they would have spent in their own countries,” said R Basil, CEO & Director, Manipal Health Systems.

## **How it all began**

Although people from all over the globe have been coming to India for rejuvenation packages, Chennai and Vellore were known to be among the best medical facilities, but catering mostly to Indians from other states. After the successful paediatric cardiac surgery by Dr K M Cherian in the late 60s (initially at Railway Hospital, Perambur and then Madras Medical Mission), there was a steady inflow of patients from the Gulf nations and third world countries coming to India especially Chennai.

Then AIIMS in Delhi and some hospitals in Mumbai started attracting foreign patients. Later, Kerala became synonymous with Ayurveda and now caters to those who want “Wellness healthcare”. The highlight of South India’s medical facilities is in the areas of Cardiology, Cancer, Joint Replacement, Neuro Surgery, Plastic Surgery, Pediatrics etc. Destination Bangalore is slowly emerging from the shadows of Chennai, Mumbai and Delhi to take its place as the most favoured healthcare destination in India. The City’s state-of-the-art healthcare infrastructure along with its salubrious climate and cosmopolitan flavour has resulted in the influx of patients from over 30 countries today, including the US, UK, Middle East, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, Mauritius and Tanzania among others.

The availability of high-end clinical talent and the people-sensitive population of Bangalore are also important factors in creating healthcare delivery systems. Conducive ecosystem “Bangalore is already the hub for complex heart related procedures. With the IT revolution giving Bangalore

the indelible stamp of a knowledge city globally, it won’t be long before we see an influx of people from all over the world coming to Bangalore for heart and brain surgeries,” averred Dr Devi Shetty, Chairman of Narayana Hrudayalaya.

Elaborating, he said Karnataka has the right ecosystem for Bangalore to emerge as a major healthcare hub in a few years. With 31 medical colleges, 800 nursing schools and innumerable pharmacy and physiotherapy colleges, Karnataka has the largest number of technical education programmes in the country. Moreover, the Karnataka government has been extremely proactive and was the first state to privatise engineering and medical education in the country.

While India’s obvious strength lies in Wellness Tourism, Bangalore has its Soukya holistic wellness centre which offers Naturopathy/Ayurvedic rejuvenation treatment, Angsana Spa with its Thai massage therapy and Prashanthi Kuteeram with its yoga therapy. Bangalore is particularly strong in cardio-vascular surgeries, hip replacement surgeries and invitro fertilisation.

## **Foreign flavour**

“Manipal’s flagship hospital on Airport Road, Bangalore received close to 3,000 patients from 29 foreign countries last year. An entire floor called the ‘International Patient Care Centre’ complete with a European ambience and equivalent services is fully operational to cater to their needs,” said Basil. Last year, of the 3.5 lakh patients treated by Wockhardt, 890 were foreigners primarily from the US and UK and the number is expected to go up to 1,100 this year, said Vishal Bali, CEO of Wockhardt Hospitals Ltd. “We do 24 cardiac surgeries a day and 20 per cent of our patients are foreigners. Although majority of them come from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Middle East and Africa, we have treated patients from 22 different countries so far,” said Dr Shetty.

Large investment to support the domestic and foreign demand for healthcare, huge capital expenditure to the tune of Rs 800-1,000 crore has been planned in the next three years, by most of the hospitals in Bangalore. The investments will go towards capacity expansion and upgradation of technology. Wockhardt Hospitals has recently launched a brand new cluster of super-specialty hospitals on 2.5 acres of land on Bannerghata road.

The Rs 150 crore, 400-bed, hospital will be among the largest and most modern facilities in Asia dedicated to cardiology, orthopaedics, neurology and an entire wing dedicated to women's health. The group has earmarked Rs 500 crore for expansion upto 2007. "Bangalore is poised to be India's healthcare hub in the next five years and Wockhardt super-specialty hospitals will be one of the catalysts. More important, in addition to Indraprastha Apollo, New Delhi, Wockhardt Hospital Mumbai is the only other hospital to be accredited by the Joint Commission International, which enhances our credibility with foreign patients," said Bali. Manipal Health Systems has allocated Rs 800-Rs 1,000 crore for the next five years. It is moving one-step ahead from its primary, secondary and tertiary healthcare centres into quaternary care where they will perform five different types of transplant surgeries on the heart, liver, lungs, kidneys and bone marrow.

Manipal Hospital in Bangalore is India's first multi-specialty; tertiary care hospital to be ISO 9001:2000 certified by TUV Rhineland for clinical protocols, nursing care, administration, support and allied services. An entire general ward caters to patients from Tanzania and Mauritius, as the Manipal Group has tie-ups with the governments of Tanzania and Mauritius. "Bangalore has the potential to overtake Chennai, Mumbai and Delhi to become the healthcare hub in 4-5 years' time," said Basil.

Narayana Hrudayalaya is investing Rs 1,000 crore in the next three years. A joint replacement, 200-bed orthopaedic hospital was recently opened. A 300 suite, five star hospital complex with a swimming pool, exclusively for international patients is coming up in three acres of land in Healthcity.

A hospital for Cancer patients, an Eye hospital which can handle 300 cataract operations a day and a specialty women and children's hospital are also on the anvil and will be commissioned a year from today. "The day is not far off when elections will be fought over issues of health and education," said Dr Shetty. The promotion of medical tourism has so far been fragmented, underlying the need for an apex body like Nasscom for the software industry, which can coordinate the promotion of medical tourism abroad. For Bangalore to capitalise on the boom in medical tourism, it is imperative for the government to put together a blueprint for coordinating various industry players, which includes the policy makers, tour operators, hotels, transportation services, private hospitals, medical practitioners and private hospitals. ■■■■

