

Interview with Yong Yih Ming, Chief Executive Officer of Mount Elizabeth Hospital in Singapore

Learning from a Hospital in Singapore

By Japan SPOTLIGHT

Singapore is widely known for its top-class medicine and hospitals. It currently attracts around 500,000 medical inbound tourists every year, making it the most successful Asian nation for medical tourism. To catch up, what should Japan do? *Japan SPOTLIGHT* interviewed Yong Yih Ming, the CEO of Mount Elizabeth Hospital, one of the best hospitals in Singapore. He is also the chief operating officer of IHH Healthcare Singapore. IHH Healthcare is the largest private healthcare company in Asia, headquartered in Malaysia. It operates hospitals and other healthcare facilities in Malaysia, Singapore, Turkey, India, China, and several European countries, employing more than 65,000 people.

Structure & Role of IHH Healthcare & Mount Elizabeth Hospital

JS: Could you please explain to us the relationship between IHH Healthcare and Mount Elizabeth Hospital?

Yong Yih Ming: IHH Healthcare is a global private healthcare organization operating over 140 facilities across 10 countries, with Mount Elizabeth Hospital being one of the assets under IHH Healthcare Singapore. While hospitals like Mount Elizabeth and Gleneagles have unique brands, they all operate under the IHH Healthcare umbrella, forming a network of hospitals and ambulatory facilities.



Yong Yih Ming

JS: IHH Healthcare is a big private company playing a key role in healthcare in Singapore. What is the role of the government in healthcare in Singapore?

Yong Yih Ming: It plays an important role in the regulatory environment. The Singapore Ministry of Health licenses both public and private hospitals, ensuring regulatory oversight, quality management, and professional standards for all healthcare providers.

On the issue of medical tourism as well, the government acts more as a facilitator rather than a promoter of medical tourism, with the ministry ensuring clinical quality and competency, which reassures both local and foreign patients of the high standards of healthcare services in Singapore.

Medical Tourism in Singapore: Drivers, Patient Demographics & Challenges

JS: Singapore is one of the most advanced and successful nations in Asia in the domain of medical tourism. Could you explain the factors driving medical tourism in Singapore?

Yong Yih Ming: As drivers of medical tourism, I would highlight Singapore's reputation for safety, connectivity, and a multicultural environment as natural advantages attracting medical tourists, with no focused initiative for promoting healthcare to foreigners.

JS: On the current status of medical tourism in Singapore, could you tell us roughly about the demographics of foreign patients having treatment there?

Yong Yih Ming: Using Mount Elizabeth Hospital as a basis, Indonesians currently form the largest group of foreign patients, followed by Vietnamese, Filipinos, Indians, and Bangladeshis. We attribute this to geographical proximity, direct flights, and cultural similarities supported by a high quality of healthcare provision.

JS: There must be patients coming to Singapore for health check in hospitals as well as medical treatment. Is the need for health screening among

tourists visiting Singapore for medical reasons large enough to make the medical tourism business profitable?

Yong Yih Ming: In Mount Elizabeth Hospital, 55% of health screening patients are foreigners, and many proceed to treatment in Singapore if conditions are detected, facilitated by integrated patient journey services within IHH Healthcare.

JS: What are the challenges for medical tourism in Singapore today?

Yong Yih Ming: I see the strong Singapore dollar and higher costs as challenges, leading some patients to seek initial screenings in cheaper countries. However, many of them would return to Singapore for complex treatments due to its reputation for quality.

I would also point out that it is important to recognize market segmentation and that in many ways it defines the market competition landscape in the region. Different tiers of patients seek care based on their financial capacity or payer coverages, and if market segmentation is based on such differences, hospitals would attract foreign patients in the respective segments based on their brand positioning and clinical capabilities. Mount Elizabeth, though, focuses on the premium segment and is a tertiary hospital capable of managing complex conditions, minimizing concerns about excessive competition with other regional hospitals.

JS: What do you think are key factors in Singapore's success in medical inbound tourism and hospital preparedness?

Yong Yih Ming: The critical elements include language and cultural competence, clinical capabilities, infrastructure, and targeted marketing to attract and serve foreign patients. First, on the question of language and cultural competence, I would emphasize the importance of staff being able to communicate in patients' native languages and understanding cultural nuances to make foreign patients feel comfortable.

Second, on the issue of clinical capabilities and infrastructure, I would stress the need for a multi-specialty team of doctors, advanced equipment, and the ability to handle complex cases,

especially as patient conditions become more complicated with aging populations.

Third, on the question of marketing and relationship building, it is necessary to invest in overseas marketing and building relationships with foreign hospitals, payers and governments to facilitate patient transfers and maintain a steady flow of inbound patients.

JS: In addition, today in healthcare operations and patient experience, AI and digital technology seem to play an important role. What do you think of this technology issue?

Yong Yih Ming: The integration of technology, including AI and digital platforms, in clinical care, hospital operations, and patient experience, is very important in determining a hospital's competitiveness and is thus considered key to attracting medical inbound patients as well. This is also to make healthcare more sustainable for the longer term. Its future potential is enormous. I would note that in light of clinical applications of technology, the use of robotic surgery and AI-assisted procedures, which improve precision, reduce patient harm, and shorten recovery times, is key to enhancing quality of medical treatment. Operational efficiency is also enhanced by the use of robots for cleaning and facility management, reducing reliance on manpower and lowering operational costs.

As a means of enhancing patient experience, the hospital has a digital platform, LizWorld, which provides "infotainment" and supports multiple languages, improving patient comfort and engagement. However, on the limitations and future of AI, I would caution that while AI is increasingly used in operational and patient experience domains, its adoption in clinical decision-making is still limited due to trust and regulatory considerations.

Opportunities & Collaboration in Promoting Asian Medical Tourism

JS: Many Asian nations are now keen on promoting medical tourism as means of enrichment, so there would be merit in cross-border collaboration among them. How do you assess the potential of such collaboration?

Yong Yih Ming: It is important to have partnerships between hospitals in different countries, such as Singapore and Japan, to coordinate patient care and leverage each other's strengths for complex treatments. With better connectivity and flow of information, doctors can even case-manage together more easily.

JS: What do you think about health screening as an entry point for medical tourism?

Yong Yih Ming: I think health screening is an effective way to attract medical tourists, as it is elective and does not require patients to be unwell, forming a baseline for further healthcare services. It is a good starting point to have such a baseline for promoting further healthcare service collaboration among hospitals.

JS: Would regional diversity and capacity among the hospitals in different nations be an impediment to international collaboration, and if so, how could we modify it?

Yong Yih Ming: Yes, it should also be noted that varying levels of economic and healthcare development across Asian countries require tailored approaches, with more developed countries focusing on international patients and less developed ones on domestic needs. Balancing capacity and quality on medical treatment is very important.

Financial Sustainability & Social Inclusion Through Medical Tourism

JS: Medical tourism is very useful for consolidating medical capacity for mass patients, as the possible profits earned from medical services for relatively wealthy patients from abroad could support domestic medical care and thus contribute to healthcare service sustainability. What do you think?

Yong Yih Ming: I agree with you that revenues from medical tourism can help subsidize care for less affluent patients, supporting hospital maintenance and social inclusivity. Our Cross-Subsidization Model is that higher-paying foreign or private patients can help subsidize

public healthcare costs, a model already in use in Singapore's public hospitals with private wings.

Future Plans at Mount Elizabeth Hospital

JS: Lastly, could you share with us your future plans?

Yong Yih Ming: Yes, our hospital's ongoing strategy is to deepen engagement with key foreign markets through marketing, partnerships, and government interaction to facilitate patient transfers. We are interested in market expansion and engagement, and to achieve it we plan to continue cultivating relationships in Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines, India, and Bangladesh, including direct engagement with hospitals and governments to facilitate complex patient transfers.

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Written by Naoyuki Haraoka, editor-in-chief of *Japan SPOTLIGHT* & executive managing director of the Japan Economic Foundation (JEF).