

Patients prefer

SOME GO TO THAILAND AFTER INEFFICIENT HOME SERVICES WHILE OTHERS ADD CHECK-UP TO TOUR

BY NINA MUSLIM
Staff Reporter

Bangkok Thailand has become a premiere healthcare destination for UAE nationals and residents, capitalising on the distrust and dissatisfaction of patients toward doctors in the UAE and its healthcare system.

Almost 70,000 Emiratis sought medical treatment in Thailand last year, up from 48,802 in 2005. In 2003 and 2004 respectively, medical visitors from the UAE were 22,914 and 41,175. Figures for 2007 are not available as yet.

Most of the patients are either sponsored by government agencies, including the Ministry of Health, the Dubai Department of Health and Medical Services (Dohms), Dubai Police, or are military or private patients. Some travel to Thailand only for medical treatment, while others decide to include a medical check-up in their holiday plans.

Dissatisfaction

Salim Al Za'abi, UAE ambassador to Thailand, told *Gulf News* distrust and dissatisfaction in the UAE's medical services are recurrent themes among Emirati patients.

"We have good doctors and hospitals, but people don't trust them — they have not been able to convince the people ... they just don't trust the doctors in the UAE," he said.

There are many reasons for the distrust.

Some feel the medical treatment and care they get in the UAE are not worth the money they pay, some feel the service and care are too slow and insufficient, while others believe that many doctors



“ We have good doctors and hospitals, but people don't trust them — they have not been able to convince the people ... some complained of poor facilities [in the UAE]. ”

Salim Al Za'abi
UAE Ambassador to Thailand

lack the medical expertise and did not care enough about their patients. Some others have gone to Thailand to correct medical mistakes that occurred in the UAE.

Dr Ratana Meenaphant, rehabilitation medicine specialist at Bangkok Hospital, and her colleagues have encountered a few cases of medical mistakes among their Emirati patients.

"Right now, we have a boy with a brain injury. Doctors had put a shunt in the brain to release the pressure, but when we did an [magnetic resonance imaging] MRI, we found that the shunt was not working so we had to replace it," she said.

Unfortunately, the boy's condition has not improved much after arriving in July. Another case involves a patient of hers, who suffered from back pain caused by a herniated disc.

Dr Meenaphant told *Gulf News* the patient's doctors in the UAE had told him that his condition did not require surgery. After weeks of pain, he

came to the Bangkok Hospital in June.

"He came here with a cane and three or four days after the surgery, he walked out on his own," she said. "He was angry at the doctors in the UAE because they let him suffer in pain."

The revelation comes as no surprise to Al Za'abi, who has heard it all before from Emirati medical visitors.

"Some people have complained that hospitals in the UAE cannot discover cancer and other serious illnesses. Some have complained that doctors in the UAE did no investigation and that there are poor physical therapy facilities," he said, adding that the medical sector in the UAE has room for improvement.

"Government hospitals don't provide the same services as in Thailand and private hospitals are too expensive.

"Also they get immediate appointments here if they want to see a doctor. In Dubai and the UAE, they have to wait for weeks sometimes."

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70,000

Number of Emiratis who sought medical treatment in Thailand in 2006

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Sector 'will undergo revamp to regain trust'

Plans for medical ethics law to prepare medical personnel — minister

By NINA MUSLIM
Staff Reporter

Dubai The government is addressing the dissatisfaction Emiratis and residents feel about the healthcare system by passing several laws ex-



pected by the end of the year, said Humaid Mohammad Obaid Al Qutami, Minister of Health.

"Laws and regulations are coming soon that will help to improve the people's trust in us. We will have laws on medical responsibility, patient rights, and medical standards and protocols for all hospitals," he said.

According to Al Quta-

mi, a new medical ethics law is also in the plans, which will detail the ethical responsibilities of medical personnel and their required actions in the face of emergencies and other medical scenarios.

Building trust

"The new laws and regulations will help us, not only to build trust, but also make the UAE a health tourism destination," he added.

Beginning this year, the UAE has redoubled efforts to improve health-

care and medical services in the country, unveiling health strategies for Dubai and the country.

Among the improvements are building more hospitals, adding more specialties, strengthening training and expertise, decentralising hospital administration, unifying health policies, improving coordination between various health authorities and ensuring universal health insurance for UAE nationals and residents.

It has also started a healthcare free-zone,

Dubai Healthcare City that has managed to attract high-profile names in healthcare such as Mayo Clinic, Moorfield's Eye Hospital and Harvard Medical School-Dubai Centre.

Restructuring

The restructuring of the healthcare system is expected to take five years, but Al Qutami does not believe it will take that long to win back people's trust.

"People need to cooperate as well. They have to change the culture of mistrust and we have to improve the treatment. I think it will take three years to regain the trust," he said.

Till then, the UAE has no choice but to continue sending their citizens abroad, like Thailand, for medical treatment or expertise that are otherwise not available.

“New laws and regulations will help us, not only to build trust, but also make the UAE a health tourism destination. People need to ... change the culture of mistrust and we have to improve the treatment.”

Humaid Mohammad Obaid Al Qutami
Minister of Health

Where Abdul Rahman found a new life as energetic seven-year-old

Surgeons at Thai hospital repaired the defective heart he acquired as blue baby

By NINA MUSLIM
Staff Reporter

Bangkok Seven-year old Abdul Rahman Hussain Qaid cannot stop running.

A huge smile plastered on the fragile-looking face, he runs up and down the hallways at Bumrungrad Hospital in Bangkok, startling nurses and visitors as he streaks past them.

The speed in which he moves is a novelty — just a month before, he was always out of breath and tired to do anything except loll about like a ragged doll, according to his father, Dubai-based Hussain Qaid Mohammad Al Haji.

"He was a blue baby when he was born," he told *Gulf News*. "When he was born, he had a condition that was very difficult to repair. I was told to be patient because he would need lots of surgery. Doctors also told me that most times, babies with the condition die."

Abdul Rahman, the youngest of six children, had been born with a single ventricle heart defect, in which oxygen-rich and poor blood is mixed in a single ventricle, causing low oxygen levels and fatigue.

At the age of only seven days, Abdul Rahman underwent his first heart bypass surgery to repair pulmonary hypertension at Mafraq Hospital in Abu Dhabi. The surgery did not work. Abdul Rahman still had pulmonary hypertension.

Al Haji then had a choice to make. Dubai Police, his employer, asked him where he wanted to go to treat his son.

"I didn't trust the doctors in the UAE, so I asked to go to Thailand and [since then] I have kept coming back because I preferred to stay with one doctor," he says.

Abdul Rahman is just one of the thousands of Emiratis seeking medical care in Thailand.

On July 17, 2007, Abdul Rah-

man finally underwent a surgery that he has been waiting his whole life for.

Paediatric cardiac surgeons at Bumrungrad Hospital performed the Fontan procedure on him to direct oxygen-rich blood into his lungs and organs.

"I was anxious with every operation because he is the baby. But when the doctor came out of the operating theatre with a big smile, it gave me confidence that he is finally all right," says his father Hussain Qaid Mohammad Al Haji.

"Abdul Rahman can now walk and run like a normal child. His appetite is better now," he told *Gulf News*, adding that he plans to play football with his son soon.

Abdul Rahman sits next to him, rolling his eyes at his father's unusual display of emotion, fidgeting restlessly. Then, as soon as the interview is over, he is off — running like the wind.

DOCTORS SAY

No lack of expertise here

Doctors in the private sector blame UAE nationals and residents' penchant for seeking treatment abroad on ignorance of available medical services, opportunism and a trigger-happy media, rather than the lack of medical expertise.

Dr Girish Chandra Varma, consultant cardiothoracic surgeon at NMC Specialist Hospital, told *Gulf News* that world-class medical treatment in most specialties was available at their doorstep.

"We are all here. We've trained abroad, we've worked abroad and we're here to give service. But some still want to go abroad for treatment," he said.

"I think it's because they are either unaware of the services we have or they know they can get everything for free (from the government) if they go abroad (in the case of UAE nationals)," he added.

Dr Tarek Al Swaify, consultant general and laparoscopic surgeon at International Modern Hospital, has a different take on the situation.

"The problem is the lack of trust in the medical profession, which I blame on the media. Here, medical mishaps are amplified in the media that makes people think we're all the same," he said.

"There are incidents of complications here, but not more than anywhere in the world," he added.