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'We aim to boost medical tourism in India'

21 December 2014 | Interviews | By Aishwarya Venkatesh

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The medical township is an initiative of Aster DM healthcare that has a chain of hospitals across nine countries, providing specialized care in all disciplines of medicine. From a small cluster of clinics to a conglomerate of one of the largest chain of hospitals, the journey of Aster DM healthcare has indeed been very dynamic. Strategically located in Kerala, the Medcity is expected to solve Indian healthcare woes and give a new fillip to the medical tourism business in India.

In an interaction with *Biospectrum*, Dr Harish Pillai, CEO, Aster Medcity elaborates on the journey of Aster and Medcity. Edited excerpts follow:

Q. Brief us about the Aster Medcity project?

Built in the heart of Gods Own Country, Kochi (Kerala), Aster Medcity is an integrated medical township that is dedicated to taking Indian healthcare to international standards. This green-field venture, with a total investment of \$300 million is expected to attract patients from across the globe. In recent future, we at Aster aim to place India in the global healthcare map by providing world-class care that can attract medical tourism to India.

Spread across a sprawling 40 acre campus and a one km waterfront, Aster Medcity believes in advancing healing by combining science and nature. In Phase I, we have a multi-specialty hospital with 8 Centers of Excellence (COE) and phase II will have an additional 500 beds along with a medical convention center, a four-star hotel and apartments.

The multi-specialty hospital will be a one-stop-destination for all medial ailments as we provide all facilities ranging from General Medicine, Pulmonology, Endocrinology, Dermatology, General Surgery, ENT, Ophthalmology and Dental along with Diabetology and Health Check-ups. The eight COEs are equipped with world-class technologies and treatments for Children, Women, Cardiology and Cardiac Surgery, Oncology, Orthopaedics and Spine Surgery, Neurology and Neurosurgery, Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Nephrology and Urology and for Plastic and Aesthetics.

Q. Aster DM healthcare has a chain of hospital across the globe. How is the Kochi Medcity different?

Across the Middle East, Aster DM healthcare has most of its investments channelized for primary and secondary care as that is best suited for those markets. Hence, patients who needed advanced medical interventions were referred to many other countries. In India, there was a need felt for a good quaternary care center. Aster Medcity was conceived with the vision to showcase Indian medical talent to the globe and provide infrastructure and medical facilities similar to the standards of the Mayo Clinic. Through Aster, we aim to make Kochi a healthcare hub for the entire South Asia. This modern healthcare destination equipped with first-of-its-kind advanced technologies, capable for treating any disease, will take healthcare in India to international standards.

Q. Explain the importance of Kochi as a destination to house the Medcity.

The decision to have the hospital in Kochi was partly sentimental and partly strategic. Kochi is the commercial hub of Kerala and well connected to all major destinations across the globe by air. Kochi has the right ecosystem to set a project of this nature. Though Kochi has many major hospitals, paradoxically it never had a good medical college. Kochi is a price sensitive market and to establish a hospital in a district which is already locally considered as the healthcare hub of Kerala was a big challenge. In Kerala we have a very high geriatric population that needs lot of care and attention. Certain pockets of Kerala has specific cancers. There is a very high rate of cervical and breast cancers in Kerala. However, we have very few specialty centers that can offer advanced and specialized treatment for these cancers. Lot of Keralities go to other state and districts in India in search of care and this says that despite excellence in macro health indicators we still have a deficit. Hence we are trying to provide good technology, doctors, infrastructure, and, facility to create a success story.

Q. Can you throw some light on some of the unique technologies used in Aster Medcity?

At Aster, we aim at patient centered care. The whole hospital is a hi-tech facility and hence we are leveraging technology to minimize time and errors. We have Intelligent Queue Management system, the entire hospital premises has the pneumatic tube system to facilitate transport of documents, and drugs, which helps in delivery patient-critical items quickly. We have a robotic program for urology and laser technology. We hope to be the first hospital in India to install robots in pharmacies. All the medical data generated is automatically picked up by a software installed, hence the doctors and nurses need not do charting. This saves time and minimizes errors. We also have a helipad for air evacuation services and we also have first responder services in case of accidents. All our COEs are standalone units and has all the necessary equipment and services needed for examination and diagnosis at the center itself. We hope to be the first hospital in South India to get LEED gold

certified as we have maintained the green building standards.

The Hospital will be equipped with sophisticated Operation Theatres and high technology quotient like Advanced Image guided Intra-operative MR, capabilities of robotic and endoscopic surgeries in all disciplines. It will also have the highest rated Department of Emergency Medicine with radio controlled rescue systems and teams, and the Unique Water Ambulance System to cater to the unique terrains of Kerala.

Q. How can Aster add value to India's medical tourism business?

In 3-5 years' time we dream to become the Bumrungrad of India. Bumrungrad is one hospital that can claim above 50 percent of medical value travel. At Aster we feel that we can contribute to the country's GDP by being an effective player in the country's medical tourism business. In India we have talent, E-Visa systems and with the new government in place we hope that we can showcase India's medical excellence to the rest of the world. We would want to work with the public hospitals and create an effective ecosystem for medical value travel. We need PPP models to leverage India's talent and exhibit our potential in healthcare.

It has been just a month that we have begun operations and already 25 percent of our clients is international. We are looking at leveraging Kerala's brand equity in Europe and America to improve our medical travel business. We are also planning to establish telemedicine services in Maldives and many other geographies. As a hospital we also have many strategic and geographic advantages as Aster is a chain of hospitals across the globe in nine countries and our medical tourists can be referred to Aster hospitals back in their country for follow-up treatment. This is a huge advantage as our electronic medical records are same across all Aster. Doctors from Aster network can easily access the Aster cloud for database.

Q.What are your key plans for India in future?

Apart from Kerala, we have Aster Kaveri coming up in Bangalore and Aster Hyderabad in Andhra Pradesh. We are also planning to expand our presence to Mumbai and Chennai. We are also looking at projects in North India as well. State some interesting trends in healthcare and medicine.

There is a huge gap in the way medicine is practiced in India. We fail to diagnose diseases early which eventually leads to more disease burden and high costs. With the advances in genomics, wearable and digital health, healthcare sector is set to boom. Nowadays, cancer therapies can be tailor-made to suit ones genetic composition. Soon we can also expect brain transplants. In India with the new government in place, lot of interesting developments have already taken place. Our Prime Minister has become the champion of public health and this is a very positive sign towards being a healthy country. The government is also planning to increase funding and encourage the development of medical equipment and devices in the country. With all this soon India can become the healthcare hub of the entire world.