EDB starts first ever medical tourism push

- Lanka’s top Pvt hospitals join new drive
- ‘Huge forex potential’—EDB’s Sujatha
- ‘Great initiative’—Private Healthcare
- 2013 Service exports at $2.9B, up by 7.5%

As service exports edged towards $3B, Sri Lanka’s apex export body EDB has stepped up its effort to open a new forex source on 11 September. And the 2015-’20 National Masterplan Initiative on Medical Tourism has taken off, spearheaded by the EDB. “Professional service exports present a tremendous opportunity and can speed up government’s ‘$20B exports by 2020’ goal. Medical Tourism is one of the most promising sub-sectors in this. We are ready to work with any and all stakeholders to get this off the ground” said a keen Sujatha Weerakoone (DG-EDB) on 11 September in Colombo.

EDB DG Weerakoone was addressing the kick-off session of EDB’s 2015-20 National Masterplan Initiative on Medical Tourism held at EDB on 11 September. The pioneering session saw top reps from Hemas Hospitals, Asiri Group of Hospitals, Lanka Hospitals, Durdans Hospital, Nawaloka Hospitals PLC, the Health Ministry as well as M.K.S.K Maldeniya (ICT Sector Director-EDB) joining the session. The private sector reps also represent Sri Lanka’s Private Hospital Association (PHA). PHA hosts the majority of Sri Lanka’s private hospitals, nursing homes and private healthcare providers as its members. 55% of country’s outpatients and 15% of the country’s in-house patients, are treated by members of PHA -the rest being treated by state sector hospitals & healthcare facilities.
Global Medical Tourism industry annual turnover is not definitive but Patients Beyond Borders, the oft-referenced consumer information source about international medical and health travel estimates that by 2014, the worldwide medical tourism market to be $47B (median value, $55 B at highest), growing 20% annually with 11 Mn cross-border patients worldwide, and $4250 median spending per visit! These visit costs “include all medically-related costs, cross-border and local transport, inpatient stay and accommodations.”

Speaking on the promise of medical tourism, Rishad Bathiudeen (Minister of Industry and Commerce of Sri Lanka) at February 2014’s launch event of Intrad 2014 & Arogya 2014 at Hilton Colombo, said: “With only a per capita healthcare expenditure of $175, at first, Sri Lanka does not appear to have an advanced healthcare infrastructure similar to the developed countries. But due to the support of well-trained, high quality healthcare professionals, availability of treatment centres as well as pharmaceuticals, we are witnessing the emergence of a new sector, that is medical tourism, contributing to our service exports. Studies show that around 15% of patients in Sri Lanka are foreign patients, such as from Maldives. The EDB under my Ministry believes that medical tourism is a promising service sector to drive our foreign exchange earnings.”

“Professional service exports present a tremendous opportunity and can speed up government’s $20 B exports by 2020 goal. Medical Tourism is one of the most promising sub-sectors in this” said EDB DG Weerakoone at 11 September session, and added: “Realising the importance of this, EDB, which strongly believes in Private Public Partnership approach, has decided to make the first ever national initiative to rally the healthcare providers as well as stakeholders and formulate a common voice for 2015-20 National Masterplan Initiative on Medical Tourism. I am pleased to see all the leading private hospitals are represented in today’s session. In fact we are ready to work with any and all stakeholders to get this off the ground. We need to map out such factors as availability of hospital facilities, accreditations, specialisations, ‘centre of excellence’ areas, post-surgery and wellness packages, packages medical tourism as well as tie ups with global medical travel facilitators. The EDB can shape the future roadmap of this sector based on the collective voice healthcare operators.”

The private healthcare reps at the session pledged prompt support, even declaring this to be a ‘much needed initiative’. Dr Lalith Peiris (CEO-Lanka Hospitals), addressing the session said: “We are very happy that the EDB is taking a lead role in this much needed initiative specially at a time when many medical tourism destinations such as Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia etc are competing and out-pricing themselves. The PHA is a good starting point and together with EDB, a master plan for country’s medical tourism could be developed. This initiative can also help bring high net worth tourists instead of budget tourists and the ‘wellness medical tourism’ is a huge growth area. Through EDB we can make the stakeholders to understand how important medical tourism is.”

Responding to the comments of them, EDB DG Weerakoone stressed: “A Medical Tourism Committee and formal link with PHA could be priority steps in this effort. EDB is ready to allocate prominent space in its web portal’s “service exports” section for this initiative.”

According to the Central Bank of Sri Lanka, apart from tourism and foreign worker remittances, Sri Lanka’s total service export revenues surged by 7.5% to $2.9 Bn in 2013-60% derived from ‘transport’ (non-domestic), 24% from ICT/BPO services, 12% from both financial & insurance services and 3% from such sectors as ‘construction’ and ‘other businesses’.
At the 11 September session, EDB DG Weerakoone and the participants also mulled various other options as to how to position Sri Lanka’s medical tourism in the $47B global industry.

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PHOTO

A private healthcare rep (second from right) shows latest Lankan medical data to Sujatha Weerakoone (DG-EDB-seated far left) at 2015-’20 National Masterplan Initiative on Medical Tourism kick-off session on 11 September at EDB, Colombo.

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