

# Medical tourists streaming in after easing of Covid-19 curbs

Numbers have picked up since April 1, with patients from Asian countries like Indonesia, say healthcare providers

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Laotian businessman Vicksamphanh Chanmavong, who had flown to Singapore from Vientiane, a day after undergoing surgery here this month for carpal tunnel syndrome in his left hand. PHOTO: COURTESY OF VICKSAMPHANH CHANMAVONG

When Laotian businessman Vicksamphanh Chanmavong, 22, was diagnosed with carpal tunnel syndrome in his left hand in late March, he started his online search for an orthopaedic specialist in Singapore.

“My left hand was numb, I was shocked... I felt like my fingers were going to explode from the pain,” he said.

He had lived in Singapore for four years while studying for a degree, so the Republic was a clear choice.

“Singapore is well known for its healthcare. The doctors here have good training. So, I feel more comfortable, more confident coming here,” he said.

Ten days later, Mr Chanmavong flew in from Vientiane for a consultation with orthopaedic surgeon Kevin Koo, director of The Bone & Joint Centre at Mount Elizabeth Hospital.

“We discussed the different treatments and therapies... As my hand condition was so severe, I decided to go for the surgery,” he said.

The operation took less than an hour. He had a follow-up check a week later, and after the stitches were removed the following week, he made a business trip to Vietnam.

He is not alone.

Healthcare providers say foreign patients have been streaming into Singapore after April 1, when the Covid-19 restrictions were eased, more flights were added, and the need for special clearance to come here for treatment was removed.

They declined to reveal the numbers but said they are seeing patients from countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Cambodia, India, Vietnam and Laos.

Dr Koo said that while the majority of his patients are locals, his foreign patient load has started to pick up in the past two to three weeks. They either seek treatment for general orthopaedic conditions or specific treatment such as a keyhole cartilage and ligament repair for the ankle that they cannot get back home, he said.

Dr Wong Seng Weng, medical director and consultant medical oncologist of The Cancer Centre under the Singapore Medical Group, said: “The rebound in foreign patient arrivals is quite dramatic.”

Foreign patients started trickling in after Singapore started a Vaccinated Travel Lane with Indonesia in December last year but it was not after April 1 that many more arrived, he added.

These patients had largely stopped coming after Singapore barred short-term visitors on Mar 23, 2020.

In the past two years, Dr Wong and many other doctors had transferred the responsibility of care of their foreign patients to their local doctors.

He said they prepared exhaustive medical reports and, where necessary, provided sufficient medications for the patients as buffer.

That is a thing of the past now.

The rebound could be due to pent-up demand as well as limited capacity in their home countries.

Dr Wong said a fair number of his foreign patients have said that their home countries had to divert healthcare resources to the Covid-19 fight. They thus found it harder to access medical care as the treatment of many other conditions, including cancer, took a backseat.

Foreigners seeking treatment specifically for Covid-19 here are still disallowed, he said.

Dr Noel Yeo, chief operating officer of private hospital operator IHH Healthcare Singapore, said that foreign patient numbers have grown in tandem with the recent loosening of border restrictions and the increase in flights, though local patients had been the group's priority up



Mr Vicksamphanh Chanmavong (centre) came to Singapore for a carpal tunnel release procedure in April, 2022. He is with his orthopaedic surgeon, Dr Kevin Koo from The Bone & Joint Centre, Mount Elizabeth Hospital and a nurse at the clinic. PHOTO: COURTESY OF VICKSAMPHANH CHANMAVONG

till recently.

More than half of its general ward capacity was previously ring-fenced for local patients - both Covid-19 and non-Covid-19 ones - who were transferred from public hospitals.

“We recently discharged our last Covid-19 patient... and stood down our ring-fenced wards. To date, close to 6,200 Covid-19 patients have been treated and discharged from our hospitals,” said Dr Yeo.

“So far, our hospitals have seen an encouraging return of patients from neighbouring countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, India and Cambodia, among others.”

The numbers are still below pre-pandemic levels, but he said they are confident that the numbers will continue to rise in the coming months.

Prior to the pandemic, foreign patient arrivals in Singapore were estimated at around 500,000 a year.

A Raffles Hospital spokesman said that since the borders re-opened, they have been seeing foreign patients return here, particularly from countries where they have a presence in, including Indonesia, Cambodia and Vietnam.

“We expect more foreign patients to return after the Ramadan period and when China re-opens its borders,” he said, adding that generally, foreign patients make up about 25 per cent of the patients at the hospital.

Foreigners come for various medical services.

Mr Mohammad Ghazie Indra Dael flew in from Indonesia for a keyhole cartilage and ligament repair for the ankle in early February and stayed till the end of the month.

## CHANGE FROM PRE-PANDEMIC DAYS

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**ORTHOPAEDIC SURGEON KEVIN KOO**, director of The Bone & Joint Centre at Mount Elizabeth Hospital.

The 43-year-old country manager of a global technology firm said he had a chipped cartilage near the back of his left ankle.

He spoke to orthopaedic doctors back home about his options before deciding to come here.

He then spoke to a number of doctors here before settling on Dr Koo, who was recommended by a doctor in Indonesia.

“The total cost of surgery and medical treatment in Singapore can be up to two times the cost in Indonesia. On top of this, there are other costs like travel & logistics... for the patient and accompanying family member,” he said.

But for him, quality of life and work productivity are worth much more.

For the doctors here, some things may have changed.

“Previously these foreign patients would just fly in for a first consultation, now many of my patients do that via Zoom to have an idea of the kind of treatment we can offer for their conditions, before making the commitment to fly in,” said Dr Koo.