



FEATURE

How to become a leading hospital

Alex Wright examines the ways in which hospitals can become established centres of medical excellence, and asks experts how difficult it is to maintain a great reputation

It can take years to establish yourself as a leading international hospital.

First you have to build a strong reputation and brand, and then you have to maintain it through the delivery of excellent patient treatment and customer service, as well as leveraging cutting-edge technology and innovation.

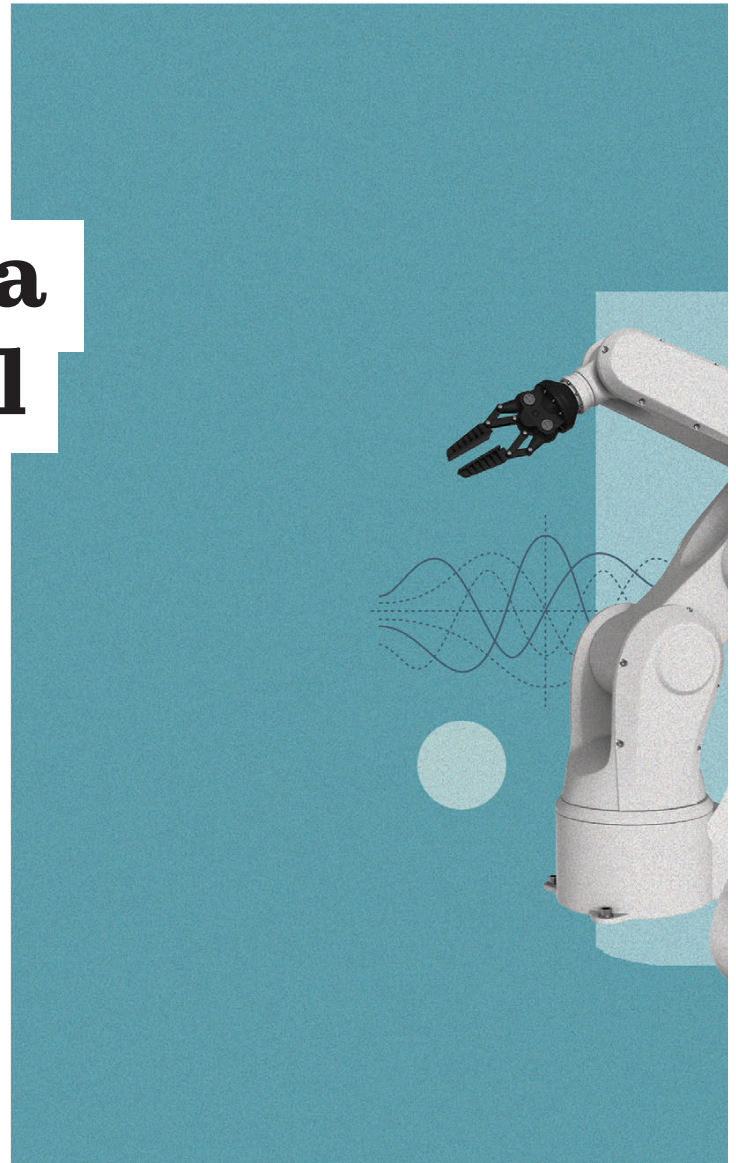
But it also requires forging long-term and sustainable partnerships with third-party providers such as insurers.

It all starts with assembling a top team of medical experts, according to Dr Antika Jacqueline Klein, Director of Utilisation Management for Third-Party Payers and the BDMS Medevac Center at Bangkok Hospital. Added to that, international hospitals need to keep up to date and comply with the latest clinical guidelines and practices, she said.

“To be a leading international hospital, you must firstly have the right team of doctors, nurses and pharmacists in place, all working together in synergy,” said Dr Klein. “Then you need to ensure that you’re adhering to all the relevant regional and international standards and accreditations.”

Dr Maria Cecilia Aponte, International Business Manager at The Panama Clinic, added: “Establishing a renowned hospital hinges on assembling a stellar healthcare team. A skilled and cohesive team brings expertise, specialisation, and trust to patient care. Each member contributes unique skills and perspectives, fostering collaboration and innovation. Trust in the hospital’s reputation is bolstered by the presence of reputable professionals, enhancing patients’ confidence and community engagement. Additionally, a cohesive team improves operational efficiency and staff morale, leading to better clinical outcomes and patient satisfaction. In the landscape, we invest in a talented healthcare workforce which is essential for achieving excellence and establishing a revered hospital.”

Dr Klein said that, additionally, hospitals should also be sensitive to different patient requirements – and that includes their cultural background.



“You must be patient-centric in everything you do,” she said. “That means taking into consideration exactly what they need, their language, and even their religious requirements, such as the provision of interpreters, prayer rooms and diet.

“All of these little things are very important to the patient. It helps to make their healthcare journey both easier and more comfortable.”

Dr Aponte agreed: “Hospitals should prioritise patient-centric aspects when setting up to ensure a positive memorable experience. Firstly, designing comfortable and accessible facilities enhances patient experience and promotes healing. Secondly, implementing efficient appointment scheduling and minimising wait times respects patients’ time and reduces anxiety. Thirdly, fostering clear communication channels between healthcare providers and patients promotes understanding and informed decision-making. Additionally, offering personalised care plans tailored to individual needs empowers patients and improves outcomes. Finally, soliciting feedback and actively listening to patients’ and companions’ concerns fosters a culture of continuous improvement, and ensures that the hospital remains responsive to evolving patient needs.”



The final element of a top hospital, said Dr Klein, is being able to showcase your specific expertise. That way, patients can feel safe in the knowledge they are going to be treated at the right place by the right person.

"Hospitals need to establish themselves as centres of excellence," she said. "Whether it's for emergency or cardiology, neurology or orthopaedics, you need to become a specialist in your own particular field."

Building a reputation

To forge a strong reputation, international hospitals first need to deliver successful patient outcomes. The more satisfied patients they have, the more likely they are to recommend them to other people and to give positive reviews and feedback on them.

"Reputation and word of mouth holds significant weight in our hospital," Dr Aponte said. "They reflect the level of care and service we provide to our patients. Positive feedback and recommendations bolster our credibility and attract new patients, fostering a sense of trust in our community. Prioritising patients and companions'

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satisfaction and actively managing our reputation are essential for sustaining the success of our facility.”

“The way we started bringing patients in at first was by word of mouth,” said Dr Jorge Pascual, Pulmonologist and Chief Executive Officer at Mayo Clinic International, which has built its success on a long-lasting reputation. “If someone had had a good experience, they would recommend us and it snowballed from there really.”

Taking that a step further, hospitals can then use those testimonials to promote and market themselves on their website, mailings and social media. International hospitals also need to showcase the accreditations and awards they receive from industry bodies in the same way. >>



“You have to be extremely targeted in your marketing,” said Dr Pascual. “So look to reach countries and people who will be most interested in your service.”

To enhance their reputation further, international hospitals should actively carry out new research into their field of expertise and publish their findings in academic journals. Collaborating with leading medical research establishments such as Johns Hopkins University and the Mayo Clinic only serves to further that even more so.

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The Mayo Clinic sends its scientists and physicians to attend and give lectures at academic research events. It also invites people into the hospital to see what the facilities and delivery of service are like.

To maintain that reputation, hospitals need to ensure a consistently high level of customer service at all times. That means making customer service ingrained in the organisation’s culture and monitoring it through customer satisfaction surveys to see what can be improved on and then implementing this into staff training, as well as rewarding employees with incentives for good performance.

“Our focus is all about the patient,” said Dr Pascual. “That means providing the best possible patient safety, outcomes, satisfaction and overall experience, and continually measuring that to make sure we’re delivering on it at all times.

“That also includes being open to new ideas and ways of doing things, right down to the best approach for reaching a patient. Essentially, you need to ensure that they feel taken care of throughout the process from the moment of initial contact to following up once they have left your facility.”

Ilan Geva, Senior Strategy Director at Vmarsh Healthcare, added: “At the end of the day patients are human beings and they should be treated as such. The top medical schools all put an emphasis on educating future doctors to treat people as humans first and patients second.”

Strong partnerships

Partnership is also at the heart of being a successful health institution. Singapore General Hospital (SGH), for example, leverages the benefits of being part of the SingHealth Duke-NUS Academic Medical Centre by drawing on the collective strengths of Singapore Health Services and its academic partner Duke-NUS Medical School.

“We actively seek collaborations and forge long-standing partnerships with other healthcare institutions, research organisations, trade and industry partners, community partners and institutes of higher learning, both locally and internationally,” said Professor Kenneth Kwek, Chief Executive Officer of SGH. “By doing this, we are able to achieve so much more in advancing patient care and improving the experience for patients, their families and our colleagues.

“We have also intensified our efforts in keeping residents well, as part of our population health strategy to keep them well at home and within the community, through deep engagement and early interventions, in partnership with a strong network of primary care practitioners and community partners. This is another example of our ‘SGH Plus’ mindset – recognising and valuing the deep expertise and vast experience of our partners, building a sustainable ecosystem of health.”

“Collaborations and partnerships are vital in the health industry,” added Dr Aponte. They facilitate knowledge sharing, innovation, and resource optimisation. By working together, organisations can tackle >>



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complex challenges, improve patient outcomes, and enhance access to quality care. Collaborations foster a culture of cooperation and drive positive change in healthcare delivery.”

With the increasing trend of patients moving away from paying directly for their healthcare and towards using insurance to cover the costs, the need to establish a trusting and long-lasting relationship with insurers has arguably never been greater. That need is only magnified when dealing with international patients travelling to different countries for treatment.

“By having an agreement in place with the insurer, patients can receive the healthcare they need and settle their medical bills quicker and more easily,” said Dr Klein. “But it’s also important to be transparent and keep all lines of communication open so that the insurer and the patient know what’s going on, and it makes the whole process more seamless and efficient for all parties concerned.”

Dr Aponte added: “Working well with insurers is important – they ensure timely reimbursements, streamline administrative processes, and improve financial stability for healthcare providers. Collaboration with insurers fosters transparency, facilitates patient access to care and promotes efficient delivery of healthcare services.”

Technology adoption

A large part of that streamlining is gained through digitalisation, with the likes of portals and application programming interfaces between international hospitals and insurers being used to exchange information, submit invoices and approve payment. That way the whole treatment and discharge process can be speeded up and is more secure than sending letters or emails.

Artificial intelligence (AI) has been another game changer for international hospitals. BDMS, for example, has developed its own AI tool called the BDMS Utilization Review Technology to prioritise urgent cases, while SGH is just taking its first steps.

“In recent years, we have set up our own 3D printing centre for customised medical devices and implants, especially beneficial for complex surgical cases, and used robotic process automation for many tedious, repetitive and time-consuming tasks,” said Professor Kwek. “We are beginning to incorporate AI to leverage our extensive data repository to enhance and accelerate decision-making and provide decision support across the enterprise.”

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Taking the concept a step further, in December, Cleveland Clinic became a founding member of the AI Alliance, an international community of researchers, developers and organisational leaders working to develop safe and responsible AI that benefits society. Members come from a range of organisations engaged in AI education, research, development, deployment and governance.

“As a leader in healthcare AI, we recognise that it has the potential to quickly accelerate the pace of medical research and enhance patient care,” said Dr Tomislav Mihaljevic, Cleveland Clinic CEO and President, and holder of the Morton L Mandel CEO Chair. “AI capabilities are now constantly growing and improving, and it is critical that organisations from diverse fields come together to help advance AI discoveries and technologies while also addressing concerns around security and safety.”

It’s also vital that hospitals keep investing in innovation labs and sandboxes, where new concepts can be developed. Thanks to

advances in technology, hospitals can already capture far clearer and more detailed 3D images of the patient and carry out minimally invasive procedures using robotic-assisted surgery. For example, Cleveland Clinic recently became the first medical centre in the US to perform gastric sleeve surgery using a surgical robot with magnetic technology. Now, health facilities are going even further and faster than before, pushing the boundaries of what is possible with modern science.



“It may seem like a big investment at the time, but the benefits you can reap from technology are enormous,” said Dr Klein. “There are better outcomes all round: [with robotic surgery] the patients are under anaesthesia for a shorter time and there’s less risk of further complications, while the doctor can take care of more patients, so it’s a win-win situation for both parties.”

Data is also key to a hospital’s success. In the early 1900s, the Mayo Clinic pioneered new methods of organising patient data when internist Henry Plummer created the ‘dossier’ system that compiled a patient’s medical history into one folder. Later widely implemented in other hospitals, the dossier system has evolved at Mayo into an integrated medical record that can quickly bring patient, physician, laboratory tests, radiology reports and medical records into one room at the same time.

“From the start, data has been a central part of our approach to treating patients at Mayo,” said Dr Pascual. “We have created medical records for all our patients that they can take with them wherever they go in the world. It’s a much more reliable and efficient way for the patient and their doctor to keep track of their medical history and the treatment that they have received.”

Another area that has become a mainstay for international hospitals in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic is telemedicine. Giving patients the capability to connect remotely with a doctor via a video call wherever they are makes medical assistance far more accessible, and it looks likely to be a trend that’s here to stay.

Only when all of these various elements are successfully combined can international hospitals truly achieve the status of being a leader in their given field. Establishing that position is hard, but maintaining it can be much tougher. ■