

Consumer satisfaction in healthcare drops by 2 per cent

Marked decline in customers' perception of value: CSISG2013

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SINGAPORE - The bills for Mr Sim Ching Tong's mother at a restructured hospital last year — for problems like fits and a urinary tract infection that required stays of three to seven days each time — came up to over S\$12,000. But while the professionalism of the doctors and nurses he encountered was commendable, other aspects of his mother's stay were less than satisfactory.

On one occasion, his mother, Mdm Kuek Sui Kian, was housed in the observation ward for two days before a bed was available. Mr Sim recalled: "The beds were one or two chair widths apart. It was cramped, the narrow bed was uncomfortable and there was no space for her to change her clothes."

The 44-year-old sales executive said that the doctors and nurses had done their best to help, but the constraints in equipment and basic facilities like bed space needed to be addressed.

Cost was a concern for Mr Sim, who said he has seen a significant increase in his mother's medical expenses last year. Mdm Kuek was born in Malaysia and became a Permanent Resident (PR) 10 years ago. In 2012, the Government announced that healthcare subsidy rates will be adjusted to "further sharpen" the distinction in benefits that citizens and PRs receive. A Class C ward patient in a public hospital with an average monthly income of S\$3,200 and below, for instance, would receive an 80-per-cent subsidy if he were a citizen and 55 per cent if he were a PR.

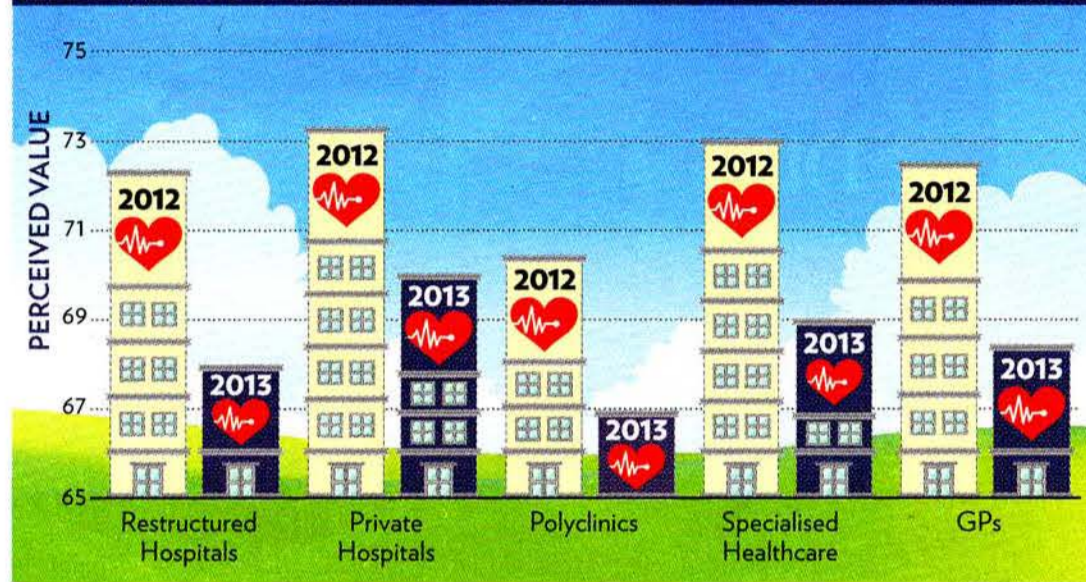
A DECLINE IN PERCEIVED VALUE

According to the Customer Satisfaction Index of Singapore (CSISG) survey conducted by the Institute of Service Excellence at Singapore Management University (ISES), the healthcare sector registered a 2-per-cent decline in national customer satisfaction last year. Scores in all five measured sub-sectors — general practitioners, polyclinics, private hospitals, restructured hospitals and specialised healthcare — decreased.

ISES noted that a fall in customers' perception of value was observed in all five sub-sectors. Also, value had become a more important driver of satisfaction compared to 2012.

Assistant Professor of Marketing (Practice) and Academic Director of ISES Marcus Lee said: "This data suggests that healthcare consumers are, compared to last year, becoming

CSISG 2013: PERCEIVED VALUE FELL ACROSS ALL FIVE HEALTHCARE SUB-SECTORS



SOURCE: ISES

GRAPHIC: CINDY CHAN

more price-conscious in the face of rising healthcare cost."

Last year, the consumer price index (CPI) for all items rose by 2.4 per cent from 2012, according to data from the Department of Statistics Singapore. The CPI for healthcare rose by 3.8 per cent over the same period. According to the CPI released by the Department of Statistics for February, healthcare costs rose 4 per cent from the same time last year.

PRICE VERSUS QUALITY

Value can be understood simply as quality over price, said Dr Jeremy Lim, Partner and Head of Asia Pacific Region, Health & Life Sciences at consulting firm Oliver Wyman. With high rates of healthcare inflation and the challenges brought about by ageing and increased population size, he felt that the drop in the perception of value is unsurprising.

When Ms Eunice Boo accompanied her mother to a private hospital for a hysterectomy last year, she found herself wishing for more information about the procedure. "The overall experience was pleasant," said the 28-year-old event producer. "But the nurses who went through the details with us didn't speak very good English. The medical terms were hard to understand. They could have explained them in more layman terms and be more patient with our questions."

The bill came up to about S\$6,000, which Ms Boo felt was too much for a "simple day procedure" and a seven-hour post-surgery stay for observation.

HEALTHCARE COST A CONCERN

To Ms Boo, healthcare costs are too high and a cause for concern as her parents grow older. She sees investing in health insurance as one way of coping

with future medical bills. At the same time, she hopes for better support from the Government. She said: "I've always thought that we should be given the choice of using the CPF Ordinary Account for medical fees. There should be more uses for that money instead of just for housing."

In Mr Sim's case, while he can still afford to pay for his mother's hospitalisation expenses using his Medisave account, rising healthcare cost is a worry. "Things are getting pricier. More expensive healthcare can't be helped, but it's still a burden. I hope more can be done to help with the elderly's healthcare expenses and to relieve the burden of caregivers."

IMPROVING HEALTHCARE

To keep customer satisfaction levels up, Dr Lee said that healthcare providers should ensure that any fee increase matches up with customer perceptions of overall quality.

Thomson Medical Centre (TMC), which had a 8.8-per-cent increase in its score from 2011 to 2012, experienced a 4.5-per-cent decline in this CSISG.

Group President of Thomson Medical Chan Boon Kheng said that inconveniences resulting from the hospital's upgrading works could have played a part in the lower score. Last year, TMC refurbished its neonatal intensive care unit and added more beds, single rooms, life-saving equipment and other facilities. The hospital is developing a service training programme and has recently implemented initiatives like breast-feeding consultation and a post-discharge follow-up phone call for first-time mothers.

"Our patients' needs and expectations are evolving and we are conscious of the need for our service delivery to keep in step with the higher

expectations," said Dr Chan.

A SYSTEM OVERHAUL

While there is a need to build up healthcare infrastructure, Dr Lim cautioned against going overboard. He said: "Over-supply runs a very real risk of driving inappropriate demand and servicing of that demand."

He added that it was more important to take a holistic approach and also consider long-term goals, by beefing up community resources, improving home care and augmenting primary care.

He believes that the healthcare system is overly focused on measuring productivity, using labour input and output metrics inappropriate for healthcare, like the number of patients a doctor sees. Productivity measures are important, but it is "critical that healthcare planners be savvy about what to measure and reward".

One way to improve productivity is to use technology. Dr Lim cited how patients in some health systems track their blood pressure readings themselves. The readings are wirelessly transmitted from the measuring device to the doctor's practice and prescriptions are refilled electronically. The patient need not wait two hours for a routine follow-up.

"Today most healthcare services still need to be delivered in person. Compare this with banking where the majority of service needs are routine, straightforward and done remotely, online or over the phone. Patients rightly ask: 'Why can't healthcare be like that?'" said Dr Lim. "The challenge for healthcare providers and governments is to align what they do and what the customer or patient sees value in."

This report is a collaborative project between TODAY and the Customer Satisfaction Index of Singapore.

“What Singapore really needs is a rebalancing of the overall health system to shift resources out of the acute hospitals into the community.”

Dr Jeremy Lim
PARTNER AND HEAD OF ASIA PACIFIC REGION, HEALTH & LIFE SCIENCES, OLIVER WYMAN

CSISG 2013 SATISFACTION SCORES: HEALTHCARE (SECTOR SCORE 69.9)

PRIVATE HOSPITALS		RESTRUCTURED HOSPITALS	
Hospital	Score	Hospital	Score
Raffles	73.6	Khoo Teck Puat	71.6
Mount Elizabeth	73.0	National University	69.8
Mount Alvernia	72.1	Tan Tock Seng	69.6
Gleneagles	71.6	KK Women's & Children's	69.1
Parkway East	69.9	Changi General	68.2
Thomson Medical Centre	69.5	Singapore General	67.4
		Alexandra	66.4
Sub-Sector Score	72.2	Sub-Sector Score	69.0

SOURCE: ISES