

World class healthcare, absolutely free

A super-speciality hospital here has redefined the approach to healthcare by providing world class treatment completely free.

Patients referred to Sri Satya Sai Institute for Higher Medical Sciences hospital do not have to come in with a credit card or a cheque book.

'Here we don't charge for anything, whether it is a heart bypass, lung operation, or a brain surgery,' says Satyaranjandas Hegde, a top neurosurgeon and director of the 330-bed hospital. 'In fact, we have no cashier or a billing section.'

Treatments, tests, medicines, food and hospital stay are all free, 'and if some tests cannot be done here, we get them done outside at our cost,' says Hegde.

On an average day, surgeons here perform six neuro and seven heart surgeries. Together with laboratory tests, X-ray scans and outpatient procedures these are worth over Rs.5 million (\$100,000) in commercial terms but done free, says Hegde, who quit his high paying job in another hospital because he did not like the 'commercial culture' there.

He was not the only one to make the switch. Kolli Challam, head of anesthesia and critical care, left his flourishing practice in Abu Dhabi two years ago to join Hegde's team.

Government dispensaries do offer free treatment for minor ailments but tertiary care always involves money, says Hegde. 'It is a disaster for a poor family if one of its members requires brain or heart surgery. It means selling family jewels to meet hospital costs or just pray to god and hope for the best.'

For thousands of Indians - as well as patients from neighboring Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka - their god comes in the shape of the Sai hospital. Set up in 2001, it is run by a medical trust created by Sri Satya Sai Baba, a spiritual leader with a global following.

Built with trust funds, the Rs.200 million that the hospital spends annually on salaries, medicine, equipment and maintenance come entirely from unsolicited donations from his devotees.

'The state government gave us land and the power supply for hospital is free,' Hegde said. 'Companies give us medical equipments at discount and one computer firm installed Rs.10 million (\$20,000)-worth hospital software at no cost.'

The hospital does not advertise to fill non-clinical positions. Skilled workers queue up to volunteer their services because of their faith in Satya Sai Baba.

Those who man the gates, serve at the reception and counsel patients are all volunteers inspired by Baba's philosophy that 'seva,' or selfless service, is service to god. People wanting to offer 'seva' are so many that there is a waiting list for volunteers, says Hegde. 'We keep rotating them to give everyone a chance.'

Sai hospital is actually known as a 'temple of healing' as it provides medicare in a spiritual ambiance

devoid of commercialism, its employees say. 'I can see god's mission being carried out here,' said former president of India A.P.J. Abdul Kalam during a visit to the hospital in 2006. 'The doctors and staff looked to me as angels.'

Free service does not mean compromising on quality or standards, Hegde points out. 'Ours is as well equipped as, or better equipped than, corporate hospitals.'

The hospital, with highly qualified physicians and surgeons, attracts dozens of specialists from India and abroad because they are either devotees of Satya Sai Baba or 'infected by the desire to do seva', says Hegde.

Sivaraman Yegyaraman, a practising cardiac electro physiologist in Stratford, New Jersey, is one such specialist who comes to Sai hospital twice a year at his own expense. 'I had always wanted to place my medical training at the service of the under-privileged and Sai hospital presented me the opportunity,' he told IANS during his recent visit.

Another regular visitor, Ravindra Goyal, chairman of neurosciences at McLaren Regional Medical Center in Flint, Michigan, is a Satya Sai Baba devotee. 'Each trip to this facility charges and motivates me to apply the principle of 'selfless service' to my work back in the US on my return,' he said.

What makes the Sai hospital unique? It is not just the state-of-the-art technology or high quality service but the spiritual ambiance pervading through the campus, says hospital manager Sri Krishna.

'It actually makes me feel I am entering a temple and not a hospital,' said Akella Chendrasekhar, medical director of Wyckoff Medical Center in New York. He was one of three specialists who came from the US spending their own money to conduct a workshop on 'critical care medicine' at the Sai hospital last week.

By redefining medical care Sai hospital has clearly shown it is certainly possible to provide the best treatment absolutely free, says Hegde. 'There is no reason why this model cannot be replicated in other places in India and even abroad.'

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