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ASIA EDITION

Rural Thailand is facing severe health challenges

December 28, 2012 | Opinion | By BioSpectrum Bureau



Thailand's healthcare system has come a long way, we have a population of almost 70 million people and 99.5 percent of the population is covered by Universal Healthcare Coverage. While this system, implemented in 2002, provides some real advantages, the country still faces a number of healthcare challenges.

Thailand, like many other parts of Asia, is characterized by a rapidly growing, ageing population which is living an increasingly urban and sedentary lifestyle. By 2050, almost 30 percent of the Thai population is expected to be 60 years and older, meaning more people with increasingly complex conditions will require medical attention.

At the same time, Thai people are becoming increasingly affluent. This is leading to an increased demand for medical care, as well as higher expectations for its quality and availability. While government funded medical care is readily available, the level-of-care and accessibility varies across the country. The quality of healthcare provided in cities like Bangkok is generally good, while more remote areas are facing a shortage of clinical resources.

Thailand's medical system has performed more than seven million operations and while almost all of them were covered by Universal Healthcare Coverage, the public system still has to manage seven million operations. This means there can be significant waiting times for people to receive necessary care. As Thailand's population grows, and ages, the demand on already stretched resources will continue.

There is no doubt that Thailand is confronting big healthcare challenges. The question is how do we tackle them to ensure that people across the country receive affordable, high quality care?

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We need to innovate, and look at what solutions are available outside Thai borders. We need to implement cost-effective systems that save time and can be tailored to fit within our existing healthcare infrastructure. Thailand also requires solutions that are practical for use in rural or remote areas that are lacking the staff or clinical facilities available in the bigger cities.

Across Thailand, medical providers have been looking to our Asia Pacific neighbors to provide affordable, adaptable technology. Today, a number of these solutions are coming from New Zealand. I have had the opportunity to work with a number of innovative New Zealand healthcare management systems and see first-hand the benefits they provide in a fast-paced, clinical environment.

New Zealand faces similar healthcare challenges to Thailand, with an aging population, increasing medical demand and a shortage of skilled medical professionals.

To help address some of these challenges, New Zealand implemented its National Health Index more than 20 years ago. The country is focused on developing and refining healthcare technology and information management systems for its own healthcare sector, and is exporting these around the world - including to South East Asia. New Zealand has developed cost-effective and innovative technological solutions that are flexible and can be customized to suit local needs in Thailand.

One recent example of the Thai and New Zealand healthcare sectors working together is the memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed earlier this year between the Bangkok Hospital and New Zealand company Precept. This MoU will see New Zealand technology integrated into existing patient information systems.

The technology is designed to give time back to nurses by providing an instant overview of what is occurring in the medical ward. It also benefits patients by minimizing care errors and enabling a faster response time from the medical team.

Bangkok Hospital has also implemented a business intelligence solution developed by New Zealand company Cortell into four hospitals in Bangkok that identified cost and performance management as high priorities. Cortell Health offers a range of business intelligence products and services to support clinical and financial managers in the health sector. These solutions and services cover planning, budgeting, costing, reporting and patient intelligence.

Thanks to Cortell's customized products, Bangkok Hospital Medical Center facilities are now able to manage cost planning and budgeting, and we can see an improvement in their financial reporting and consolidation processes.

But it's not just about saving costs. We also need to reach patients in remote areas of Thailand and ensure they're getting quality care. Fast and accurate diagnosis is critical. Being able to test for a number of commonly occurring diseases with technology that is easily installed and operated in areas where there may be limited resources or medical expertise is essential to ensuring people in remote rural areas receive the medical attention they require.

Again, New Zealandis leading the way in developing mobile, affordable diagnostic technology. Currently being trialed in here in Thailand, New Zealand company Pictor's cutting edge diagnostic product can test for multiple diseases from just one drop of blood.

As Thailand's population continues to grow, urbanize and age, additional pressure will be placed on our healthcare systems and infrastructure. There is no doubt that we need to be open to looking at new technology and innovative solutions to help manage these challenges and enable the provision of world-class care across the country.

We are not alone in the healthcare challenges being faced in Thailand, they are being felt across the world. It is clear that working with offshore partners such as New Zealand will help enable the Thai health sector to develop new systems, and improve existing healthcare infrastructure.