

# Faster X-ray results, thanks to outsourcing

They are sent back from India within 30 minutes, saving patients time and money

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X-RAYS from Singapore zip across to India and reports on them come back within

30 minutes.

The age of teleradiology has arrived for Singapore.

It is a dream come true for Health Minister Khaw Boon Wan, who has pushed to outsource routine medical work. He wants the limited and expensive manpower here to concentrate on higher-end, value-added work, such as interventional radiology, which has replaced some operations with less invasive treatment.

The National Healthcare Group (NHG) has an agree-

ment with India's Teleradiology Solutions, which also services about 50 hospital and clinic chains in the United States.

Since December, Ang Mo Kio polyclinic has been sending about 700 X-rays a month to Bangalore, where trained radiologists analyse each one, make a diagnosis and send most of the reports back within 30 minutes.

By April, the Indian doctors will take over the reading of simple X-rays from another two to three NHG

polyclinics, and eventually, from all of them.

The biggest beneficiaries are the patients, who can now get their X-ray results the same day. At other polyclinics, patients need to return two weeks later.

Said a Health Ministry spokesman: "This move saves the patient a trip, a second consultation fee, and a day's productivity at work."

For the NHG, it cuts costs too, with savings likely to run into hundreds of thousands of dollars in the long

term, as it is cheaper having the X-ray read in Bangalore than by radiologists here.

AMK polyclinic doctors say there is a surprising bonus: the reports from India are more detailed than the ones they used to get.

Professor Lenny Tan, a senior radiologist with the National University Hospital, which does some of the radiology work for polyclinics, admitted wryly: "We are very economical with words. A lot of our reports are short and do not make it easy for polyclinic doctors to explain to patients."

Dr Winnie Soon, a senior family physician at AMK Polyclinic, agreed: "The Indian reports are quite detailed. This is very helpful to patients who want to know more."

It also helps doctors make informed decisions. At other polyclinics, doctors take a

quick look at the X-ray to see if there is any obvious problem, such as a fracture, so the patient can be sent to hospital if necessary.

But the polyclinic doctor can sometimes miss a smaller fracture. When the report comes back, a nurse has to call the patient again. This happens about 20 to 30 times a month. With teleradiology, this problem does not exist.

With the analysis coming back within an hour, said Dr Soon, she no longer has to make a quick decision based on her own inexperienced reading.

But not everyone is happy with the move. Prof Tan's colleagues all voiced concern. "What's going to happen to us?" they said.

His answer to the 135 radiologists here: "If you're good, should you fear competition?"

If Mr Khaw has his way,

some work from hospitals will also be farmed out to Bangalore. The public sector carries out over a million X-rays a year. Over time, more sophisticated CT scan, ultrasound and MRI images may find their way to Bangalore.

He told The Straits Times: "There are direct benefits like lower cost and faster service. But more importantly, it signals that health care is now globalised. Globalisation brings both advantages and challenges."

"If we are alive to the opportunities, we can turn it to our advantage. We can be a regional teleradiology hub."

If Singapore were to ignore such developments, he said, "opportunities will pass us by".

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