



SELFLESS SERVICE: Vaatsalya Hospitals assures quality care at affordable prices to tier II and III cities

Healing the Hinterland

Vaatsalya Hospitals takes affordable medical care to small towns in India

By B.S. VENKTESH

When Renuka Kammar delivered a baby boy, her family came to see the newborn at the government primary health centre at Kurthkot in Gadag district in Karnataka. But the gynaecologist had some bad news. The baby had developed respiratory distress syndrome and had to be taken to a hospital with neonatal intensive care facility.

By the time Renuka's family landed in Vaatsalya Hospital, Gadag, the baby was gasping for breath. The paediatrician and anaesthetist at Vaatsalya Hospital reassured the parents and got to work immediately, by stabilising the baby's breathing.

Renuka's story is not one-off. In a

town of four lakh people, the Vaatsalya facility is the only private neonatal intensive care facility that treats hundreds of babies like these every year. Distraught parents who earlier had to go to Hubli, which is 70 km away, now see a new ray of hope in Vaatsalya Hospitals. Today, more than 1,50,000 patients in tier II and tier III towns in Karnataka head to Vaatsalya every year.

Starting with one unit in Hubli in 2005, Vaatsalya Hospitals, with focus on high quality care at affordable prices, are extending quality care across majority of the districts of Karnataka. This fast growing chain of hospitals with nine units in Karnataka in less than five years brings medical succor to rural and semi-urban families. From a social perspective this stands

vindicated as 70 per cent of the Indian population lives in rural and semi-urban areas while 80 per cent of the healthcare is concentrated in the cities and metros.

Started by graduates of Karnataka Medical College, Hubli, Vaatsalya aims to build a network of 60 hospitals across five states in the next three years. The vision of building a socially responsible, yet profitable, health care business is unique to Vaatsalya. "We believe that it is possible to create universal access to affordable, efficient and sustainable healthcare in India and at the same time make an honorable profit," says Dr Veerendra Hiremath, co-founder and COO of Vaatsalya.

Vaatsalya hospitals offer primary and secondary care services in paediatric

atrics, gynaecology, surgery and medicine with special emphasis on prevention and rehabilitation. In addition, specialist services like nephrology and neurosurgery offered. Every Vaatsalya hospital stands out for its cleanliness, hygiene, efficiency of operations and superior customer service. "We structure our hospitals in such a way that we are able to cater to 60-70 per cent of the local population's healthcare needs. And our mission is to ensure that we are able to offer quality services to our customers," says Dr Ashwin Naik, co-founder and CEO of Vaatsalya.

Equally unique is the modus operandi of Vaatsalya's growth and expansion. The group moves into at new area by convening an existing building or by partnering with an existing medical facility. The existing facilities are enhanced to match the preset corporate specifications, before becoming fully operational. "The real challenge from an infrastructure point of view is the identification of space, local availability of construction manpower and the actual conversion of the building to our specifications", says Dr Anil Bidri, head of projects of Vaatsalya.

Within a short span, it has become a brand that symbolises care and con-

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cern. "Vaatsalya literally means affection. Our brand goes beyond affection and represents genuine concern for the needy while staying profitable. Our constant quest is to identify like-minded local hospitals or medical professionals in districts across India to set up Vaatsalya's operations and to bring the same quality of care and the Vaatsalya spirit to more families across India" says Rocky Philip, co-founder and VP-business development and marketing. The objective is to enhance the quality of the locally available medical service and being a key player in the overall growth of healthcare industry. "In most of our hospitals, we are bringing a service or a facility that is either complimenting what is available in the community or something which is not in existence. Before we set up

our units, people would have to travel 50-60 km to access the same service, while incurring additional expenses for travel and stay," says Naik.

To ensure that the reach of quality healthcare extends farther than the four walls of the hospitals, Vaatsalya also partners with reputed NGOs and other organisation like the Deshpande Foundation, microfinance institutions like Grameenkoota and international medical technology developers. "Our aim is to evolve and grow through partnerships that facilitate healthcare reach at the grass-root level," says Dr V. Renganathan, VP, alliances and special projects of Vaatsalya.

With its rigorous expansion plans, Vaatsalya is also helping to disperse the concentration of medical fraternity in cities. More doctors and paramedical staff are realising the merits of a career outside the metros and within the communities that they grew up in.

The vibrancy of this young team is combined with the shared passion for social good, makes working here a wonderful experience. Meetings and decision-making sessions often cut across corporate echelons and involve team members from all departments. Graduates from the top hospital management programs are part of the team, and students from all over the world work with Vaatsalya as interns.

With hospitals planned in Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra within the next six months, and rapid expansion to other states thereafter, the potential for such a business is immense. And organisations around the world have recognised the importance of such a venture. Vaatsalya has been awarded the Sankalp Award for Social Entrepreneurship 2009 for healthcare inclusion, and was the winner of the Business In Development Challenge India 2007.

However, the greatest award for the Vaatsalya team is the joy of seeing a smiling Renuka, who walks out of the hospital and says, "may there be a Vaatsalya in every town". ■



IMAGE COURTESY: SANJAY RAMACHANDRAN