

16/11/1997

Tongkah takes bold step towards getting MSC status

Francis C. Nantha

AS a general rule, it is often best to be fully informed of the details before undertaking a business venture.

Sometimes, such an approach is not possible and one such example is the nation's Multimedia Super Corridor project.

The idea behind the futuristic initiative is clear, as are the concepts for the flagship. But the problem lies in the details as much of the plans rely on mostly untried technology and services.

In such a situation, the MSC co-ordinating body has come up with the most practical solution by calling on captains of the industries to help draw up the details to make the MSC a success.

After months of consultations, guidelines for the Request for Proposals were drawn up and the rest of the nation now eagerly awaits the conclusion of this exercise so that the MSC project can then proceed to the next step.

For therein lies the true profit potential as yet untapped - in the form of tenders to be won, services to be offered and products to be manufactured and sold.

But some companies have already taken the next step without waiting for the RFP exercise to be concluded, as the first to launch their ventures can often mean success in the highly competitive business world.

One such company is Tongkah Holdings Bhd, which has teamed up with US-based Worldcare Ltd to offer telemedicine services at its Pantai Hospital chain and to other interested parties within the region.

Tongkah executive chairman Mokhzani Mahathir said the venture would later apply to be designated a MSC status firm and also participate in the RFP exercise.

Speaking after the signing ceremony at Shangri-La Hotel in Kuala Lumpur recently, Mokhzani said about RM15 million would be invested in the venture over the next two years.

Apart from linking up the five Pantai Hospitals, the joint-venture company Worldcare Health (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd will also set up eight major nodes nationwide which other interested parties can tap into.

These parties include other private hospitals, government hospitals and private practitioners.

Mokhzani said the telemedicine service allowed local doctors to get added credibility as their diagnoses and treatment would be backed with advice from foreign specialists at a fraction of the cost of travelling overseas.

"The system allows doctors to get second opinions from specialists at Worldcare consortium hospitals in the US."

They are Massachusetts General Hospital, the Cleveland Clinic Foundation, Duke University Medical Centre and Johns Hopkins University Hospital.

Diagnoses are conducted by the exchange of electronic mail and images sent over the global computer network Internet.

Images like X-rays and CAT scans are compressed up to 30 times using a wavelet compression technology so as to give higher resolutions as compared standard Internet compression formats like JPEG.

Worldcare Ltd chief executive officer Nasser Menhall said medical technicians monitored the e-mail around the clock to ensure faster reaction from specialists in urgent cases.

In terms of cost using this telemedicine service, Massachusetts General Hospital radiology department chairman Dr James Hunter Thrall said in a video-conferencing session that savings up to 80 per cent were possible.

"The savings are mainly that of not having to travel overseas to get consultations or operations, lower hospitalisation costs in the patient's own country and on follow-up treatment."

Worldcare Ltd began operating in 1994, and has since expanded its services outside the US to Jordan and United Arab Emirates. It will soon establish links with hospitals in Italy, France and the London Clinic in the UK.

Worldcare Malaysia is intended to be the telemedicine hub for Asia. Tongkah and Worldcare Ltd hold 30 per cent stakes each, with two other investors - Mitsubishi Corporation and Saudia Binladin Group's Concorde Investments Ltd - holdings stakes of 15 and 25 per cent respectively.

The interesting part about this whole venture is that it takes advantage of existing technology, while poised to embrace future developments.

Mokhzani said it was not yet feasible to have full video-conferencing services built within the system as it was still too expensive.

Therefore, futuristic-sounding scenarios like that of a foreign doctor walking through an operation with local doctors via a video-conferencing session is not expected to become practical reality just yet.

Neither is a situation where mechanical arms conduct the operation under the control of a doctor located elsewhere.

What Tongkah is doing is making sure the most critical part of the whole healthcare process is actually made more efficient - the diagnoses of any symptoms so as to be able to administer the right treatment.

While the process of exchanging information is conducted by e-mail, doctors need not always have to wait for replies as long as they have an extensive medical database available for study.

At present, most of this information is in the form of books and journals, and much time is taken to plough through all the printed data.

To ensure the most up-to-date information is made available easily to doctors, Worldcare has created a website providing such medical data.

Doctors would have to subscribe to this database and be given a login name and password such that the information is kept exclusive to medical personnel.

The website was also created to allow doctors to conduct research from anywhere - clinics, hospitals or even from home.

And to help other doctors, information can also be uploaded to a chatroom by doctors coming across a specific set of symptoms that is otherwise unknown.

And by sharing this information, in a secure environment whereby the privacy of patients are ensured, doctors are able to deduce faster what the appropriate treatment should be for specific ailments.

"What we aim to do with all these systems is to complement the experience of the medical personnel. At no time do we expect the system to take over the role of a doctor. The patient is the focus, and the doctor is in the best position to decide on the treatment based on the best available knowledge," said Mokhzani.