

31/03/2003

Global Flying Hospitals to set up Asian hq in KL

Zaidi Isham Ismail

NEILL Newton has found a novel way of providing basic medical treatment to millions of underprivileged people around the world - by literally "flying in hospitals" to their doorsteps.

To further bring the message of goodwill and hope globally, Newton will also associate this noble endeavour with a country widely known for its peace and stability - Malaysia.

The founder, chairman and chief executive officer of Global Flying Hospitals Inc (GFH) will make Kuala Lumpur its Asian headquarters, set to be operational two weeks from now.

GFH is the world's first comprehensive worldwide flying medical airline utilising refurbished aircraft as high-technology "flying hospitals", carrying trained medical professionals.

"We don't want GFH to be seen as an American- or a British-backed humanitarian medical organisation. That is why we chose Malaysia as our regional hub," Newton told Business Times in Kuala Lumpur recently.

"Malaysia is the perfect country to convey the message of healing and bringing peace to the world. Its multi-ethnic and multi-cultural background are testaments to that.

"On top of that, Malaysia is within two to three hours of flying distance within the region," said the Aussie.

So, what is GFH all about? GFH is founded by Newton, a former author, business transformation coach and keynote speaker turned philanthropist. Newton has written three books, of which readers may identify him with the best selling book "Uniqueness is a Red Striped Zebra" which sold 75,000 copies in the US.

"As I turned 55 years old, I came to a point in my life where I realise that there must be something more to life than writing and selling books.

After pondering for the last 15 years, I finally have the resources to make GFH a reality about two-and-a-half years ago," he said.

GFH's mission is to provide medical care to tens of thousands annually by bringing medical teams and facilities directly to the areas and people in the four corners of the world who are in urgent need of medical attention - free of charge.

GFH's state-of-the-art, self-contained surgical operating suites, incorporated inside the aircraft, are designed to operate in city airports and remote town strips in up to 84 targeted developing nations.

Countries include those in South America (15), Asia (13), Europe (24) and Africa (32) and in countries such as Ukraine, Angola, Burkina Faso,

Iran, Kazakhstan, Timor Leste, Mongolia, Laos, Nepal, Chechnya, Eritrea, Guinea/Bissau, Haiti, Honduras, Latvia and many others.

GFH plans to fly up to 60 missions a year (each mission lasts two weeks), treating five million people and aims to carry out five million medical procedures over the next five years.

By May this year, GFH will fly to the Philippines, Cambodia and Ukraine, aiming to carry out 9,000 procedures. In Malaysia, GFH will focus on Sabah and Sarawak where there is a shortage of medical clinics.

GFH is incorporated in the US and has regional centres in the Americas and a European regional office in Scotland. It will be operating the world's largest flying hospital, a high-tech surgical hospital built within a Lockheed 1110 Tristar jet, or GFH One.

GFH One was bought for US\$30 million (US\$1 = RM3.80) and another US\$24 million was spent on refurbishing it, such as a 12-bed pre-operation/post-operation theatre, two surgical stations, a pharmacy and nurses station. GFH also has an eye clinic, dental clinic, scrub area, supporting plumbing area, anesthesiology section and a training section.

The previous owner, also a humanitarian-based organisation, found it expensive to carry on with the endeavour.

It took three years to prepare GFH One from purchase to refurbish, inspection, fitting new engines and to raise funds. GFH has also obtained a three-year advancement enabling it to save US\$25 million.

GFH One will fly from the US in about two months to Kuala Lumpur, emblazoned with the "Jalur Gemilang" on its fuselage and will be the flagship of the organisation.

"We will operate from both Subang airport and our aircraft operations centre in Global City, Cambodia. But Kuala Lumpur will be home to GFH," said Newton.

GFH's future planned "fleet" will also include three more 747 Combi-class jets (one for each corner of the world) and 10 Hercules C-130 over a period of seven years with a combined spending of US\$120 million.

The planes will be based in Subang airport and close cooperation will be sought with Airod Malaysia Bhd in maintenance matters of the aircraft.

"Money is a key factor of course, along with the skilled resources of a whole range of people from medical to aviation and administration staff."

GFH will need US\$11 million in 2003 and US\$49 million a year in subsequent years to finance the whole of operations.

GFH is putting in place a step-by-step marketing machine through 17 fund-raising centres in many countries that will generate funds from many areas.

The non-religious, not-for-profit, multi-national, altruistic and neutral humanitarian medical organisation vision is to build a medical "airline" that is funded through many mechanisms.

They include private and group contributions, corporate sponsorships,

foundations, dedicated worldwide fund-raising events and systems. Donations can come from corporate sponsorships to raffles and personal donations.

"In fact, we will use many Malaysian products in our raffle programmes such as the sports cars and composite aircraft - further promoting Malaysia," said Newton.

GFH will offer medical services which include preventative medical care, education, inoculations and prescription medicines. It will also carry out corrective surgeries, minor surgical procedures, life-changing cosmetic surgeries and other general health examinations, and conduct medical professional education sharing of knowledge via seminars and hands on medical team work; and legacies - equipment, supplies or education materials.

GFH will consist of international teams of volunteer surgeons, doctors, dentists, nurses, medical specialists, pilots and other support staff. It will also create 80 positions from volunteers in each mission from medical specialists to nurses, pilots, computers, information technology and security.

GFH's medical teams will also share education and training with local medical professionals in person and with GFH training materials, videos, etc - leaving a medical legacy during each mission and increasing their skills to help their own people.

Newton said the Malaysian Government has been supportive of GFH in which the Health Minister Datuk Chua Jui Meng has described his meeting with GFH as "effective".

"Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is also aware of GFH and we have informed him that we will be setting our base in Malaysia."

GFH also plans to have royalties or monarchs from every country that it visits to act as patrons as well as sit on its advisory board.

What's in it for Newton? Many may suspect that in the end money is the ulterior motive but Newton insists that he is not in it for monetary gains.

"The board members including myself will be on a salaried basis which is enough for me to earn a living.

"The world is so troubled and I just love helping people in need. The world population is projected by the World Health Organisation to grow from six billion to 8.5 billion in the next 25 years and many will be deprived of basic medical care.

"I didn't have what it takes to launch GFH 10-15 years ago... now GFH is ready to transform the world and Malaysians will have something to be proud of."