



Noblesse oblige

Quality does count after all – especially in healthcare. For two years now, Barbara Hürlimann has been at the helm of the Swiss Leading Hospitals Group. We asked her – among other things – about the SLH quality concept which comprises twenty clinics so far. *Nomen est omen...*

Photos: Roli Käsbohrer

bg: Ms. Hürlimann, for years now, Switzerland was for all intents and purposes inactive in international patient marketing and virtually ignored on the global scene. At long last Osec and Swiss Tourism are going on the offensive. Can Switzerland make up for lost ground?

Barbara Hürlimann: It certainly can and there are various ways to do this. Let's face it: "Made in Switzerland" delivers a fundamentally positive message, conveying values such as quality, reliability, security and stability. These are all traits that are extremely important in the area of healthcare. However, the international approach based on a strong Swiss domestic market has to be well prepared. Organizations and clinic associations are key here because they act as a collaborative and consequently more powerful presence. Marketing is of central importance in this respect. The Swiss Leading Hospitals, for instance, is an independent group. For many years now it has taken measures to enhance its international orientation. On the one hand, we are working with selected intermediaries and international insurers and on the other we are regularly represented by individual SLH members at important international congresses. But marketing efforts must also be underpinned by services that deliver corresponding excellence. We mustn't forget that the proportion of foreign pa-

tients with private insurance in Switzerland is continually falling, so those who pay for their own services are also extremely important to us from the economic aspect.

The hotel-like nature of the private clinics is very much emphasized in patient advertising. In your opinion, where does the Swiss added-value lie, in the wellness aspect or leading edge medicine?

The two aspects work hand-in-hand. Today it is important for leading edge medicine to be combined with the wellness aspect. Top specialists must be recruited for posts in the medical fields. State-of-the-art medical technology and infrastructure are vital. At the same time, however, patients demand personal service, a family atmosphere and all forms of treatment under one roof. Swiss medicine and its doctors have an excellent reputation. However, the added value of "Swissness" alone is becoming increasingly smaller from the global viewpoint. It is only excellent services that continue to be highly valued. This is one area where Swiss clinics in particular score top marks.

You see process standardization as one of the key measures in the development of a clear profile of services. At the same time, you also value "personalized medicine" – this seems like a contradiction in terms. How do you reconcile these two strategies?

There is no contradiction here, but rather two trends that are running in parallel. Clinics today must be able to meet both requirements – cost efficiency and individual patient needs. The standardized processes do not relate to direct patient care. Patients cannot see or feel them either. It's like any enterprise: process efficiency must be increased, cost management optimized. At the same time, you have to maintain the highest service quality. After all, economy and quality will be the key factors in future healthcare. An awareness of costs and simultaneously an awareness of quality: Our job is to keep this delicate balance.

Another of your tasks is to develop an awareness of costs amongst employees in the hospitals. How are you tackling this and what do you hope to achieve by it?

Hospitals and clinics, whether large corporations or SME, privately or publicly funded, will be forced to increase efficiency, because from 2012 onward, the legislative authorities will require the quality of results to be published and, as such, will be demanding transparency and comparability. This is in turn expected to encourage competition between the hospitals. Public standards will be developed as a result, providing for comparison between the quality of hospitals and clinics throughout Switzerland.

Healthcare

You recruited the “Medicina” Clinic in Moscow, as it were, and you have now also succeeded in gaining accreditation for the “Rak Hospital” in the Emirates. What are your international objectives?

The Swiss Leading Hospitals are pursuing two objectives. First of all, we would like to systematically promote our unique understanding of quality abroad and attract foreign clinics that meet the quality criteria. This will allow us to build up a global network. The advantage of international partner clinics is that they have a local presence in the corresponding market, with the appropriate infrastructure and corresponding service offering. This means that patients in those markets seeking or receiving care in Switzerland can go for pre-assessments or follow-up care at home. After the Medicina Clinic in Moscow, the Rak Hospital in the United Arab Emirates is the second foreign member of SLH. By the way, we do provide support for our member clinics in attracting foreign patients.

How do you structure the knowledge transfer with your international partners?

The basis for membership of The Swiss Leading Hospitals is the fulfillment of strict quality standards. From the strategic aspect we work closely together with Sonnenhof Swiss Health Ltd., which specializes in services for hospital planning, realization and management and has a well-established international network. It implements the international quality criteria for us in accordance with the latest developments and the internationally applicable standards abroad. Plus, it organizes quality assessments for the potential foreign member clinics.

As a result of the strategy of expansion chosen by the Hirslanden Group and the push by GSMN into the German-speaking region of Switzerland, the market will become even tighter. Will the continuing international expansion and presence of the SLH become the key competitive advantage?

The competitive situation will not be the deciding factor in individual regional markets. What will be crucial is the fundamental alignment and positioning of the respective clinic and the structure of its quality management. If you want to be seen as an innovative service provider in healthcare, then you must have a clear profile of services and guarantee quality that is transparent and of a high level. Systematic quality management can ensure that a clinic has secure guidelines to meet upcoming challenges. Quality management is therefore the key and this must be reviewed regularly. Let me give you an example: a clinic can only become a member of The Swiss Leading

Hospitals if it passes a very strict quality assessment procedure. The core criteria are quality planning, control, assurance and improvement, the medical accreditation procedure, medical support, standards of nursing care, the hotel aspect, administrative and infrastructural aspects as well as patient satisfaction. The aim of the regular re-qualification procedures is to enable the respective clinic to continue developing and improving. A type of selective fitness test as it were. Hospitals that are unable to keep pace with these challenges will be left behind. Economy, quality and efficiency will be the determining factors in the healthcare of the future. ■



Barbara Hürlimann

Barbara Hürlimann has been the Managing Director of The Swiss Leading Hospitals since 2007. As a lawyer, she possesses wide-ranging knowledge in the area of healthcare and tariff law, amongst other things owing to her long-standing position at the head of Legal Services at Switzerland's largest health insurer Helsana. Additionally, she has a Masters Degree in Social Insurance Management.

The Swiss Leading Hospitals

What sets the 18 member clinics of The Swiss Leading Hospitals SLH in Switzerland apart is their first class infrastructure and a unique understanding of quality. The SLH members align themselves to the “leading edge medicine plus first class hotel” formula. The SLH label guarantees the highest standard of medical quality. The stringent quality requirements represent a milestone in the Swiss hospital landscape. The Swiss Leading Hospitals have a presence throughout Switzerland and cover the entire range of specialist medical fields. They are consequently the only independent group of clinics offering a nationwide service. The group also includes two foreign hospitals, one in Moscow and one in the United Arab Emirates.