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A one-stop hospital

Officials hope new Tijuana complex will draw patients from north of border

By Sandra Dibble and Sarah Skidmore
UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITERS

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TIJUANA – Mexico's largest private hospital chain has moved to the California border, causing a stir in the medical community as it opens the largest and most comprehensive private care facility that this city of more than 1.5 million residents has known.

The \$70 million complex, operated by Mexico City-based Grupo Empresarial Angeles, includes the 118-bed Hospital Angeles and a nine-story tower of 108 medical offices in the city's upscale Rio Zone.



JIM BAIRD / Union-Tribune
The \$70 million Hospital Angeles complex in Tijuana's Rio Zone was open for tours Thursday.

The hospitals' operators are counting on drawing a significant portion of their patients – as much as 25 percent – from Southern California. They are offering care at lower cost, they say, but at standards similar to those north of the border. Hospital administrators say their services will cost about 40 percent less than comparative care at a San Diego hospital.

"The goal is to be as competitive as U.S. hospitals in terms of quality," said Olegario Vázquez Aldir, the chief executive of Grupo Angeles.

The company, which operates radio stations across Mexico and the Camino Real hotel chain, has opened 14 hospitals across Mexico since 1986 and is preparing to open five more.

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With its own pharmacy, blood bank, X-ray equipment, neonatal intensive care unit, nuclear medicine lab, monitoring equipment, emergency room and a dozen operating rooms, the hospital's infrastructure marks a significant step forward for Tijuana, where patients must often see a doctor in one location, visit a specialist in another, and get blood tests or X-rays in yet another.

"It is a watershed for Tijuana," said Dr. Cesar Amescua, a pain specialist who will be the hospital's medical director. "Patients will be able to have their problems resolved without leaving the facility."

Physicians working at the hospitals are certified in their specialties through their respective associations, Amescua said.

Inside the blue-and-orange building, the walls are decorated with brightly colored abstract art by Tijuana painters, and white couches grace the entrance. With its wide marble hallways, the hospital feels more like an upscale hotel than a hospital.



JIM BAIRD / Union-Tribune

The comprehensive private care facility's opening this week in Tijuana drew VIPs, some of whom arrived in this Rolls-Royce.

Thursday's inauguration drew hundreds to the facility, including Gov. Eugenio Elorduy Walther and Tijuana Mayor Jorge Hank Rhon. Also attending were Cardinal Norberto Rivera of Mexico City, Mexico's highest-ranking Catholic prelate, and Julio Frenk, the country's health minister.

Hospital Angeles will give those Mexicans who have traditionally crossed to the United States for medical care greater reason to stay in Mexico, Frenk said. "Today, Mexico offers options that rival those of any institution in any part of the world," he said.

For decades, scores of small private hospitals and clinics across Baja California have drawn large numbers of patients from the United States. However, doctors acknowledge that the quality of care is uneven and that weak regulation has allowed many facilities to operate outside the law.

A representative of San Diego-area hospitals welcomed the expansion of medical services.

"Anything Mexico or Tijuana is doing to improve health care for their own population should be viewed in a positive way," said Judith Yates, president and chief operating officer of the Healthcare Association of San Diego and Imperial Counties.

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However, Yates said she hopes the hospital also will act as a safety net, treating the uninsured and low income, not just focusing on high-income patients.

Frenk called for closer monitoring of both public and private hospitals.

"The division is not between public and private hospitals, but between good and bad," Frenk said. "What we need is that all facilities, public or private, are of good quality."

Dr. Pedro González Pacheco, who represents private insurance companies in Tijuana, said private medical care has made strides across Mexico in recent years, especially as more Mexicans purchase health insurance policies.

Two smaller private hospitals in Tijuana, Hospital del Prado and Excel, have offered open-heart surgery for years.

Dr. Patricia Aubanel of Hospital del Prado said she hopes the new hospital can help showcase the good medicine that takes place in Tijuana and sometimes has gone unnoticed.

"We really welcome that they come," said Aubanel, a heart surgeon who has worked on both sides of the border and founded a cardiovascular center in 2002 at Hospital del Prado. "It's good for the city. It puts us at another level of competition, which is always good."

Growing numbers of patients from across the United States reportedly have been going to Mexico in search of elective procedures such as gastric bypass operations and plastic surgery offered at a fraction of U.S. prices.

"We basically hope to offer one more alternative for the Mexican-American population living in Southern California," said Dr. Victor Ramírez, medical director for Grupo Angeles. "Our market is always local, but in this case, here in Tijuana, many Mexican-Americans may want to have access to this hospital."

Hospital Angeles is trying to get contracts with several private insurers in the United States and with cross-border health plans. The group said it is also negotiating with the U.S. government's Medicare program in the hope that it can treat U.S. retirees; Medicare doesn't pay for care in foreign countries, except in rare emergencies.

The Grupo Angeles chain was started in 1986 by Olegario Vázquez Raña, who made his fortune in the furniture business. The group purchased its first hospital from the U.S. company Humana in Mexico City.

■ Sandra Dibble: (619) 293-1716; sandra.dibble@uniontrib.com

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