



Private vs Public

Health Care in Hong Kong

With expertly educated doctors, modern facilities and strong government support, Hong Kong enjoys one of the best health care systems in Asia. Both private and public medical services are available, and to truly understand health care in Hong Kong it is important to explore the differences between the two systems.

Summary

Hong Kong has one of the best public health systems in Asia, and alongside it are unparalleled private health care options. This guide will lay out the aspects each system has been offering the residents of Hong Kong, as well as the visitors from other countries that require medical procedures, and ultimately show that the public system works, while private care in the city has wide-reaching benefits with broader access to treatments, more control and comfort.



Accessibility

The Hong Kong Hospital Authority oversees 41 public hospitals, 47 specialist and 73 general out-patient clinics across Hong Kong, Kowloon, the New Territories and outlying islands. Seventeen of these public hospitals are open 24 hours per day, seven days a week operating Accident and Emergency departments.

There are just 13 private hospitals in Hong Kong, but these institutions offer patients far shorter waiting times, and the ability to schedule elective surgeries at their chosen date. Public hospitals, on the other hand, have what many would call excessively long waiting lists. In 2014, the South China Morning Post [reported the case of Yim Man-fung](#), a 72-year-old woman who waited 10 years for cataract surgery on her right eye — a procedure that lasted just 10 minutes. In its list of estimated



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waiting times, the Hong Kong Hospital Authority warns patients that they can expect to wait around 30 weeks for surgery, 41 weeks to see a gynaecologist and 96 weeks for an ear, nose and throat appointment. In the New Territories West hospital cluster patients will see a wait of six years for total joint replacement surgery, and the wait time for cataract surgery at a public hospital in Hong Kong Island West is similar.

The Hong Kong Hospital Authority attributes these long waiting times to an overburdened public health system and has predicted that the problem will worsen due to Hong Kong's rapidly aging population. At the moment there are six working age people to every resident over the age of 65. By 2023 that ratio is expected to grow to 5:1 and in 20 years could reach 3:1. In an effort to steer clear of increasingly long wait times, many Hong Kong residents are already investigating the possibilities of private insurance and private health care. A huge number of patients are choosing private dentists instead of waiting to attend a public dental facility — of which there are 11 in the whole territory with a single clinic on Hong Kong Island.



Comfort

Many patients cite comfort as their primary reason for choosing private over public care. At the private Hong Kong Sanatorium and Hospital, for example, patients in the least expensive six-bed general ward can enjoy free wireless internet, a personal entertainment system and wall panels for greater privacy.

Patients who would prefer not to stay in general wards have the option to pay for a semi-private single room, which offers a little more in comfort and privacy, or a fully-fledged private room that



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has exclusive access to a personal lavatory and shower room, and more luxurious items such as large televisions or wardrobes.

Those willing to pay for a decidedly more luxurious stay at a private hospital are absolutely able to do so. At HK\$22,000 per night, the Hong Kong Sanatorium and Hospital's Ellen Suite is the most expensive in the city. This suite includes a spacious patient's room with private lavatory and washroom, a visitor's room and eight-person dining room, a kitchen with microwave and fridge, and an exclusive skyline view of Happy Valley. Other private hospital suites around Hong Kong offer catering from the Shangri La Hotel, HDTV, high-speed Wi-Fi and the option of a bathtub with jets. Patients who don't need a Jacuzzi, however, will be happy to learn that public hospitals in Hong Kong enjoy a reputation for being clean, safe and comfortable — and for an extra HK\$136 per day you can even enjoy hospital meals tailored to a European diet.



Quality of Care

Public health care in Hong Kong is widely praised for its well-trained staff, modern facilities and strong medical results. Indeed, the well-documented overburdening of public health services - from both residents and international patients coming to Hong Kong as medical tourists - speaks to the quality of care that can be found in the city. The aforementioned overburdening has not gone unnoticed by private institutions, who endeavour to deliver an even higher quality of care to cater to those growing needs.



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Private hospitals in Hong Kong enjoy an outstanding reputation, with many facilities employing internationally-trained and specialist staff. At a private hospital or clinic patients also have the opportunity to see the same physician at every visit, an experience that many feel improves the quality of care through fostering a sense of relationship and community. The Matilda International Hospital, for example, operates one hospital as well as two off-site medical centres, all of which are connected through personal and electronic networks to offer patients a seamless health care experience. The Hong Kong government has praised the private sector's use of electronic records as an efficient means of sharing medical history and contributing to patient health and safety, and the future of public health care in Hong Kong needs to follow suit.



Cost

It will be no surprise to learn that medical care in Hong Kong is cheaper in the public rather than the private sector. Indeed, Hong Kong has one of the most heavily subsidized health care systems in the world, with the government covering up to 95 percent of in-patient and clinical costs.

In-patient costs at Hong Kong's public hospitals are low at HK\$100 per day, which includes treatment, diagnostic tests and room and board. Other costs come to

HK\$45 for a general out-patient visit, HK\$80 for renal services such as dialysis, HK\$17 for dressing and injection and nothing for psychiatric community nursing care. [As noted by the Food and Health Bureau](#), even the most expensive procedures such as liver transplant incur a bill of just HK\$100/day, with the government subsidizing most of the total transplant cost: around HK\$540,000



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Private care is billed to patients at market cost. Patients can expect to pay over HK\$1,000 for an out-patient appointment, or several thousand dollars a night for a stay in a private hospital. Public medical costs are set by the government and consistent at every public institution, whereas private costs are set by individual hospitals and out-patient clinics. A list of public health care prices is available through the [Hong Kong Hospital Authority](#), but private institutions are under no obligation to publish their prices, the lack of transparency making it difficult for cost-conscious consumers to estimate a final bill.

Many do consider Hong Kong's private care to be quite affordable, especially in comparison to costs in the United States. In the U.S. a colonoscopy can cost as much as HK\$20,400 whereas the same treatment in a private Hong Kong hospital average HK\$5,570. Private health insurance also improves the affordability of non-public care in Hong Kong, and due to high demand for public services in recent years, the Hong Kong government is even considering new programs to encourage residents to purchase private health insurance if they can afford to do so.



Accident and Emergency

Although private hospitals in Hong Kong generally operate 24-hour out-patient services, serious emergencies are often referred to the nearest public hospital. Patients who call an ambulance will likewise be taken to the nearest public hospital with an Accident and Emergency department and may be treated immediately depending on the severity of their condition. Every Accident and Emergency department in Hong Kong operates on a triage system, giving emergency care priority to patients who need it most.



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Alternative Medicine



Although no public hospitals offer specialized services in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), the Hong Kong Hospital Authority has developed referral services between public hospitals and nearby Chinese medical practitioners. These TCM partner institutions don't offer patients the Hong Kong public health pricing scheme, but they are required to meet Hospital Authority guidelines for evidence-based disease treatment and general care.

Patients interested in a certified, private TCM clinic will find myriad options in Hong Kong. Some private hospitals also operate their own TCM centre. At the Hong Kong Baptist Hospital, patients can visit TCM practitioners registered with the Chinese Medicine Council of Hong Kong at the hospital's Chinese Medical Clinic and receive acupuncture, tianjiu therapy and other TCM treatments.

Other alternative health services including homeopathy, reiki and naturopathy can be found at private clinics around Hong Kong. Prices for these services vary, and although there is little regulation of these alternative clinics by the Hospital Authority, discerning patients can find experienced, internationally recognized and certified physicians who specialize in alternative health practices.



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