

Bridging the gap

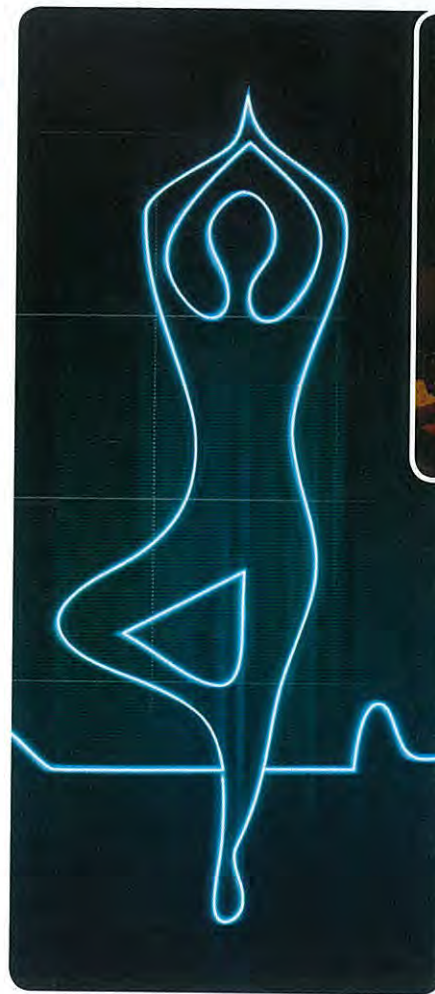
How the merger of medical, spa and wellness facilities will raise the profile of the region's spa industry by helping to establish a holistic healthcare system

The profile and significance of the region's spa industry is set to increase in 2009, not because of the launch of an all-singing, all-dancing, million-dollar project as might be expected in the Gulf, but thanks to industry experts focused on establishing new medical spas. These spa professionals are working to not only revolutionising the spa market, but ultimately towards establishing a holistic approach to healthcare in the UAE and Middle East.

Already the fastest growing spa segment in the US, according to the *2007 Spa Industry Study* by the International Spa Association (ISPA), the trend for offering spa alongside medical facilities is starting to emerge in this region. Signalling its commitment to the cause is one of Dubai's most established spa businesses, Spa Resources International (SRI), the name behind Cleopatra's Spa at Wafi. The company has signed a joint venture with United Eastern Medical Services LLC (UEM), forming Spa Resources United Eastern LLC (SRUE).

Daniella Russell, director of Wafi Health & Leisure, says the venture "aims to address the regional increase in interest for integrative health, leisure and wellness services".

"It will result in various upcoming projects of advanced medical entities in the



UAE consisting of spa and wellness facilities as the part of their set-up, which will complement the idea of creating a comprehensive healthcare environment in the UAE and the region," explains Russell.

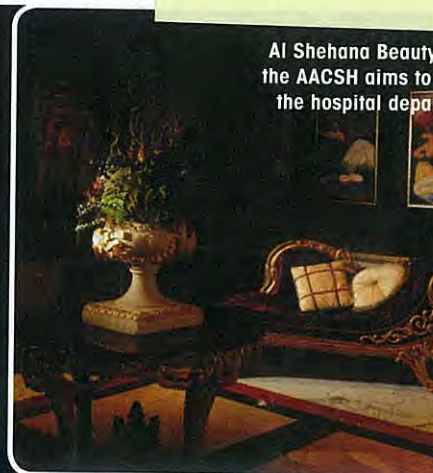
"We are bringing our expertise in the spa and wellness field of the Middle East to the forefront by offering our deep understanding of the public needs of wellness as it pertains to the very particular lifestyle people live in this region," she continues.

"You can travel around the world to get excellent medical or spa services, however we are aiming to provide the community with a much more personalised approach, based on the consideration of local culture."

One of SRUE's first projects will be the creation of a medical spa at UEM's Danat Al-Emarat Hospital in Abu Dhabi, a US\$205 million complex for women and children.

"Our special wellness programmes will be linked with the other modalities of the hospital to ensure that we integrate our offering to maximise the best for every client. Nutrition, for example, is crucial in all areas of the medical and wellness world and this is a central practice that will lend itself to the core principles of wellness and health, while also being active within a hospital environment," says Russell.

Al Shehana Beauty the AACSH aims to the hospital depart



"This will be one of many areas of expertise that will be synchronised and immersed into the philosophy of the erty to ensure that the client/patient be holistically treated to maximise all ings to achieve complete results," sh

It is SRUE's holistic focus that UEM aging director and CEO Mohamed Al Shorafa is most committed to.

"We believe that integrated and ho healthcare is very important in creat health system in the UAE. Wellness i much a part of such integration, espe in this part of the world," says Al Shor

He says the medical spa will offer s treatments alongside health and mec programmes including: complement and alternative medicine, anti-ageing and laser, detoxification and physical fi

"A much more comprehensive Spa Wellness Institute will be established Danat Al Emarat hospital that integra medical science with fitness and educ programmes. Premium hotel-like ser will also be available, including a num F&B outlets," says Al Shorafa.

Meanwhile, Wafi Health & Leisure launching its own medical spa this mo Cleopatra's Medi Spa is designed to pvide wellness care in an environment integrates spa services as well as con ventional and complementary treatment

Integrated example

While SRUE's rollout plan will be far r ing, there are several medical spas alr open, such as Al Shehana Beauty Mec Spa at the American Academy of Cosm Surgery Hospital (AACSH) in Dubai.

According to the hospital's executiv chairperson and certified dermatolog and laser specialist, Dr Jeehan Qadir, t medical spa complements the surgica cedures and adds great value for clien especially in terms of rehabilitation.

"From our medical perspective, the bination of both services for rehabilita

is essential to deliver the best result and safety to the client pre- and post-surgical and non-surgical services," says Qadir.

"For example, patient rehabilitation is compulsory for treating weight problems, with lymphatic drainage therapy post-operative helping to speed healing and prevent bruises and swelling after surgeries like rhinoplasty and face lifts.

"Endermology will reduce water retention and increase the healing process, especially post liposuction and abdomenoplasty, while the need to provide detoxification, especially for smokers or alcoholics, before surgery or after, is essential for everyone to live a healthy life," continues Qadir.

The spa also benefits clients not requiring surgery, for example by treating eczema and psoriasis in the presence of a dermatologist, with steam occlusion therapy to maintain moisturisation.

"We use multiple machines to complement the service at Al Shehana spa, from body toning, facials, crystal peelings, body and face lift, body detoxification, hair treatment and relaxation therapies," adds Qadir.

She explains that the synergy between the hospital and the spa also assists in client consultations, as both have access to client records. The gap between healthcare and wellness is further bridged by the spa, says Qadir, by a focus on "successful post-operative wellness", to help prevent the recurrence of the original medical problem.

"Al Ghezlan non-surgical, anti-ageing clinic is a bridge to the spa for post-acne treatments, such as microdermabrasion, and it also offers a single semi-invasive procedure for the treatment of cellulite," adds Qadir.

Alternatively, clients can choose multiple non-invasive, painless cellulite-busting procedures in the Al Shehana spa.

"We always give treatment options and alternatives for our clients," says Qadir.

Growing the trend

The emergence of medical spas in the region presents two key issues for the industry: will they compete with hotel and day spas, and how will they be staffed?

SpaFinder president Susie Ellis, who has witnessed the medical spa trend growing in the US, doesn't envisage a threat to the existing Middle East spa industry, a sentiment echoed by Russell and Qadir.

"I don't think that medical spas pose a real threat to luxury spas because they are very different. People go to medical spas generally for medical procedures and they go to luxury spas to relax, learn from a healthy lifestyle and de-stress," says Ellis.

"Medical spas are well suited to the Middle East market because there is a strong

“Our wellness programmes will be linked with the other modalities of the hospital to ensure an integrated offer”

focus on beauty and health here. In the past, many people from the Middle East would travel to Europe or the US for medical services, whether aesthetic or preventive. Now that there are some high quality facilities available in the Middle East, this will keep some of the business here," she adds.

Staffing new medical spas would be a challenge, however. "We acknowledge the fact that there is a shortage of talents in this field in this market," admits Russell.

"The extra challenge for recruiting for a medical spa includes the fact that the people who provide the services need a higher level of skill. That means more training, as well as higher salaries. There is a skilled labour shortage in the spa arena and in the nursing profession, so there will most likely be recruitment challenges," says Ellis.

Qadir adds that therapists at Al Shehana spa are "certified qualified nurses with cosmetic therapy training", who prescribe treatments with a physician's referral.

She warns that of the need for rigid checks on medical spas because of the risk of "unprofessional centres that misuse the privilege and operate medical procedures illegally in unlicensed spas and salons".

Dr Gerald Huber, regional director for the UAE/GCC for Schletterer Wellness & Spa Design, which has designed the spa at The Cube planned for Dubai Sports City, warns also of the "loose and unprotected" use of the term medical spa.

"You have to stress that the concept of real medical spas is very new, and therefore a very limited number of such facilities exist worldwide. Real medical spa — not beauty surgeries — means a holistic approach to health by a comprehensive combination of medical, nutrition, lifestyle and mental methods," asserts Huber.

Schletterer has taken a unique approach to this trend, with the concept of a sports medical spa focused on "sportive training,

prevention and rehabilitation by means of profound status evaluation including blood testing, personal training, physiotherapy, infusions and nutrition guidance".

"A novelty will also be the implementation of a low oxygen atmosphere to simulate high altitude training. This very positively affects not only physical performance but also metabolism, therefore enabling healing success in relation to diseases such as diabetes," says Huber.

The final question now is whether the global economic crisis will cause a temporary halt in the growth of such exciting new trends, as spas take the safe option and stick with what they know best. SpaFinder's Ellis doesn't think this will be an issue.

"I don't see a slow down in new trends because there are so many factors that go into the making of a trend, not just the economy. What drives the industry more than economics is consumer needs and medical advancements. For example, the new product Reloxin, which reduces wrinkles immediately, will be a competitor to Botox. It's coming out soon and will no doubt galvanise another large group of consumers to give medical spas a try," says Ellis. **SM**



The Cube at Dubai Sports City will offer the first sports medical spa in the GCC

WHAT IS A MEDICAL SPA?

- a facility that operates under the full-time, on-site supervision of a licensed healthcare professional
- the primary purpose of a medical spa is to provide comprehensive medical and wellness care in an environment that integrates spa services, as well as traditional, complementary and/or alternative therapies and treatments
- it must operate within the scope of practice of its staff, which can include both aesthetic/cosmetic and prevention/wellness procedures and services

Source: International Spa Association