

The Virgin Islands Consortium

With Medical Tourism And Economic Growth In Mind, Doctors Launch Plessen Healthcare

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ST. CROIX -- While companies and their lawyers wrestle in local and U.S. courts for what's remaining of HOVENSA -- the oil refinery that was once the main breadwinner for over 1,000 locals -- the struggle to find another industry continues, as leaders desperately search for that aha moment that would provoke an economic boon on the struggling island.

But while government officials continue on their quest, a group of doctors believe they've identified a venture that could give rise to an all new product here: medical tourism.

Their facility, encompassing the entire lower floor of the new Government Employees' Retirement System building, located in Orange Grove, is a state-of-the-art operation with a heavy focus on eye care. The north side offices include a receptionist, secretary, doctors' offices and a conference room. On the east side of the building, however, a whole new world meets the eye. There's a waiting area where patients sit before undergoing surgery, but one could almost feel the energy in the post-operation rooms, where lively nurses work with steady confidence that relays a relaxing aura to those waiting to be operated on.

It's called Plessen Healthcare, LLC. The name was derived from the group's original plan to purchase the Drive-Inn facility, located in Estate Plessen. However, once they decided to rent from GERS instead, in part to contribute to the sustainability of the local government, the name was kept. The startup boasts 22 employees, including a team of dedicated physicians and nurse practitioners, and offers a wide range of general services and internal medicine subspecialties dedicated to chronic disease prevention.

The Consortium had a chance to speak with the firm's CEO, Jan B. Tawakol, M.D., and was also treated to a tour of the sprawling space -- we even had a chance to witness a cataract surgery being performed.

According to Dr. Tawakol, the idea for what is now Plessen Healthcare was birthed four years ago, during a time when it faced



Dr. Jan B. Tawakol describing a

state-of-the-art eye surgery machine.

"The hospital, at that time, had a lot of problems," Dr. Tawakol began, "and a number of the physicians in the hospital came together with the idea of creating a platform outside of the hospital that could be utilized, on one side, by investors to invest money in the healthcare system, and by physicians to come and use it as a facility or a platform, and therefore by the patients, who would benefit from it directly by having some services available that the hospital doesn't provide in an outpatient setting."

Dr. Tawakol imagines Plessen Healthcare working hand-in-hand with JFL on the essential front of providing care when a patient is treated at the hospital and needs continuous care -- making it "easier for the hospital to discharge patients, because

there's somebody else on the outside ready to take care of them," he said.

Yet, the consideration of JFL was only part of a multi-pronged assessment, and Dr. Tawakol described the third, medical tourism, as having the most potential for St. Croix. He said, citing data provided by Governor Kenneth Mapp during his State of the Territory Address, that the territory loses \$100 million yearly from residents who leave to pursue medical services that are not available here.

"Instead of these patients spending the money on airfare, hotels and whatever they do in the states while they pursue that service, maintaining that income here on island would be a great boost to the economy," Dr. Tawakol continued. He also saw an opportunity for residents of Caribbean islands who'd rather travel to the territory in lieu of the more expensive journey to the mainland. And attitudes are already changing, he said, as some patients have voyaged here for care, when they would have otherwise went to the U.S.

"The immediate benefit from that is hotel occupancy, especially the smaller ones, and small airline companies," the doctor added. "Our goal is to promote St. Croix as a medical tourism destination and collaborate with Department of Tourism, with the hotels and tourism infrastructure here to make this a more pleasant and affordable destination."

Both local and foreign investors have stakes in Plessen Healthcare. The group built a facility that incorporates the most update-to-date features, and has been inspected by the Accreditation Association of Ambulatory Healthcare. AAAHC has already evaluated Plessen Healthcare on behalf of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid, surveying the group on clinical operation as well as life safety -- including a detailed inspection of the facility's construction, which Dr. Tawakol revealed was built using 2014 guidelines -- a plus for Plessen Healthcare as CMS allows guidelines dating back to 2002. After inspection reviews, results of which are expected anytime, CMS is expected to grant Plessen Healthcare CMS participation.



Dr. Kevin Stewart

Inside the ambulatory surgical center, there are two operating rooms and another area that holds five post-operation patients. As previously stated, Plessen Healthcare's current focus is eye surgery, which includes cataract, glaucoma and retina, performed by Dr. Kevin Stewart and Dr. Jesse Pelletier. Bios are [here](#).

"The reason we're concentrating on the eye is because, according to ophthalmologists, there was a backlog of nearly 800 residents needing eye surgery. They were unable to handle the situation and the Department of Health, seeing the growing need of eye surgery in the Caribbean, gave us the certificate of need to perform eye surgery here on island," Dr. Tawakol said.

The Consortium was invited to watch as Dr. Stewart performed cataract surgery, which was completed in about five minutes. Guided by state-of-the-art equipment and the experienced hands of Dr. Stewart, the process looked quick and easy. Plessen Healthcare performs roughly 30 surgeries weekly.

The facility is built and the need is great, but "St. Croix needs more physicians" if the idea of medical tourism is to be successful, Dr. Tawakol said. He said in order to attract physicians to the territory, these doctors must be given the ability to work with inpatients and outpatients, meaning, provision should be made that gives the physicians freedom to practice at the hospital and at private practices.

"I think this is a perfect combination where we're able to be in collaboration with the hospital, where we can attract physicians that would provide services at the hospital -- that's where we crucially need them to provide inpatient services -- and some work outside as well. And this is what would attract physicians here. Not only are they looking

for a combination of the two -- which would see these physicians becoming of great use inside the OR of the hospitals, in intensive care and where you need additional services," Dr. Tawakol said, his calm demeanor not successful at masking the passion for what he sees as a great opportunity for the territory.

More than anything, though, a deep love for St. Croix has kept Dr. Tawakol and his colleagues here. In conversations with The Consortium, the doctors gushed about the island and its beauty, and have pledged to continue supporting the economy through their efforts.

Finally, the doctors said, care at the facility is affordable, and one does not need insurance to be receive care.

"We try to accommodate people with all types of insurance, with no insurance and with medicare and medicaid -- that way nobody has to go off-island," Dr. Stewart said. "This facility is about half the price, self-paid, compared to what it is in the hospital. The goal is to be able to provide high volume and accurate surgery for all the people."