Hospitality service of another kind – by Frank CHAN, JP
Integrate 2013 Facility Management Conference

Good Morning President Jenny, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

Hong Kong is one of the most densely populated metropolitan cities. If we divide HK’s 7M population by her 1,100 square kilometres’ land surface, we would have more than six thousand inhabitants per square kilometre. However, over 75% of all our land is basically country park, green zone, water body or land for agricultural use. Therefore, most of the 7 million people are actually crammed within 76 square kilometres of residential land. As a matter of fact, over half of the Hong Kong people are now residing at fifteenth floor or higher. Surely, facility management is indispensable for Hong Kong.

Could you imagine how Hong Kong would look like if we are to cater for an additional 49 million people? Staggering as it may sound but that is the number of tourists Hong Kong received last year. Altogether, they spent more than HK$300 billion during their visit. That is why tourism, and in fact the entire hospitality industry, is a key pillar of Hong Kong’s economy. Out of the 49 million visitors, 24 million of them stayed overnight. The 250 local hotels are no doubt the bedrock underpinning Hong Kong’s tourism industry. Our hotel facility management friends are destined to prosper as Hong Kong is poised to become the world’s fifth most frequently visited destination by 2020. Given such a background and prospect, our discussion and sharing with respect to “Facility Management in Hospitality Industry” is indeed timely.

The Electrical and Mechanical Services Department oversees a wide portfolio of government facilities ranging from airport to port where people come and leave Hong Kong, and from hospital to crematorium where people arrive and depart this living world. Today, I would like to share with you some observations and thoughts on facility management from a different perspective. Instead of hospitality service, please allow me to digress a little bit to talk about hospital service.
Hospitals in Hong Kong, public and private, take care of roughly 22 million patient admissions last year, a figure that is slightly less than the 24 million tourists who stayed overnight. On average, patient stays in public acute hospital for 5.2 days as compared with the 3.6 nights for tourist staying in local hotel. In terms of occupancy rate, public hospitals in Hong Kong come up with an average 83.5% which is slightly less than the 89% for hotels.

Hospital and hotel are apparently very much different. But if we take a closer look, you would be amazed by their similarities in many aspects. The primary objective of hospital and hotel is to serve the people they receive, and accommodation is part and parcel for both of them. Irrespective of where you stay, there is a need to check in either by yourself or your companion. During your stay, there are personnel looking after your food and drink, as well as special treatments to upkeep your mental and physical well being. While some hotel chains offer extensive choices of pillow to suit your personal preference, public hospitals in Hong Kong on the other hand give you a standard offer, with pillow enclosed in plastic bag for the reason to achieve better hygiene and to lower the risk of cross infection.

In a sense, both hospital and hotel are places for rest and recovery. Every member of hospital staff endeavours to make your stay comfortable if not memorable. Sooner or later, for better or worse, one day you would check out, knowingly or unknowingly. Usually the number of people checking-out and checking-in remains the same. Yet, there are many occasions where the number of people checking-out is more than that at time of check-in, and there are increasingly more twins and triplets these days.

There are however fundamental differences between hotels and hospitals. The key difference lies in the very nature of the target customers. Hotel patrons are mostly healthy with good mobility, whereas patients in most cases are suffering from illnesses, and many a times with impaired mobility. Owing to their health condition, patients are inherently more susceptible to harm. Consequently, facility managers in hospitals have a lot more to do in safeguarding patient safety.
In a hospital, there are many medical devices that are life supporting, and there are services that cannot be interrupted. Nobody would accept the possibility of power outage when a patient is undergoing surgery. Similarly, nobody would tolerate a black out of the intensive care unit. For this obvious reason, all acute hospitals in Hong Kong are equipped with dual feed electricity supply from power companies. They are further backed up by emergency generators and battery banks to ensure continuous electricity supply for essential services.

The importance of water supply in a hotel needs no introduction. The enjoyment of a nice bath or shower often comes high in terms of customer expectation. Inside hospitals, facility managers strive equally if not harder to ensure reliable and hygienic supply of water. For those who suffer from kidney failure and rely on haemodialysis, they need continuous water supply for the treatment process that takes 4 hours to complete. As such, dedicated water treatment system and storage tank are provided apart from potable water.

Water supply system, if not properly maintained, could become a breeding ground for bacteria that inflicts Legionnaire’s Disease. The impact upon hotel and hospital are equal, except that patients are more vulnerable. A few years ago, the bacteria Legionella found its way into the water distribution system of a public hospital in Hong Kong. Soon after the discovery, facility managers and infection control experts worked round the clock to disinfect the entire water distribution system inside the hospital. It is the first of its kind for facility managers to tackle Legionnaire’s Disease in Hong Kong. But it is one of the many occasions where facility managers have contributed in safeguarding public health.

As many of us would vividly recall, ten years ago Hong Kong was struck by the SARS pandemic. Subsequent investigation reveals that, the former Metropole Hotel which is now renamed the Metropark Hotel Kowloon, was in fact the epic centre where SARS began to spread. During the stay of a doctor from Guangzhou who had contracted SARS, 16 people were infected, leading to an outbreak across the globe. Locally, over 1,700 people fell victim of SARS of which 299 perished.
Our tribute goes to the healthcare workers, for they had, amid stress and threat, demonstrated resilience and selfless devotion, and saved Hong Kong from having more casualties. Yet, they were not alone in the battlefield. In those days when the mechanism of SARS transmission remained unclear, the operation and maintenance of air-conditioning system and ventilation equipment inside the hospitals are risky manoeuvres. Bracing against the tide of infections, facility managers and many others were at the forefront to devise and implement improvement measures in an attempt to safeguard patients and hospital personnel from cross infection.

While lightning does not strike twice, pandemic nonetheless found its way back to the Metropark Hotel again. This time it was the Metropark Hotel at Wanchai instead of the one at Kowloon. In 2009, upon the confirmation of Asia’s first case of swine flu, the Hong Kong government immediately quarantined the Metropark hotel where a Mexican was diagnosed to have contracted the disease. As a result, 300 hotel patrons and staff were barred from leaving.

At the beginning, anger and frustration flared among the detained hotel patrons. Seven days later, they smiled and waved while emerging from the hotel. Impressed by the caring services they received and after days of living together, many of the hotel staff and patrons became friends. Needless to say, the commitment and dedication of all those behind the scene in ensuring seamless hospitality service is instrumental.

After all, facility management is about serving people. It is the value of the services that matters, not facility management itself. With that, hospital service is no different from hotel service, and is indeed hospitality service of another kind.

9 May 2013