SINGAPORE: Weeks after one survey had rated public hospitals and polyclinics among the lowest in customer satisfaction, another one has found that most patients are either "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with their services.

The later survey on independent patient satisfaction, commissioned by the Ministry of Health (MOH) last year, found 76 percent of respondents rating the service at hospitals and polyclinics "excellent" or "good"; in 2006, the figure was 71 percent.

Of the hospitals, two have shown a marked improvement in overall satisfaction. The Singapore General Hospital (SGH) and Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) shot up the rankings.

At SGH, the figure went up from 65 percent in 2006 to 76 percent last year while at TTSH, it rose from 57 percent to 69 percent during that time.

“One key strategy" to its "marked improvement", said SGH director of communications and service, Mrs Tan-Huang Shuo Mei, was to "engage the hearts of our patients". This includes calling discharged patients to find out how they are.

As for the low satisfaction with its A&E department, Mrs Tan-Huang attributed this to SGH's policy of not turning away patients "even if we have a bed crunch", leading to a longer waiting time for bed allocation.

As for TTSH, it still has "much more room for improvement" — through staff training, communicating with patients and improving operational efficiencies such as reducing waiting times, said chief operating officer Albert Tan.

This would be a welcome move for their patients who were happy with TTSH's service standards, but not with the long waiting times.

Accountant Ng G T, 54, spends about three hours at TTSH each time she goes for a check-up on her injured hand: "The waiting time is terrible."
The survey further found the National University Hospital (NUH) had maintained its 2006 patient satisfaction level, but acting chief executive Joe Sim is not disappointed.

With an 11-percent increase in patient volume over the last three years, he is glad the hospital has managed to maintain satisfaction at 68 per cent "despite the increased workload and other constraints".

He said the NUH is "actively working on various measures" to address issues of waiting time and space shortage.

Both Alexander Hospital (AH) and KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH) have continued to improve — steadily from 2005 to 2007 — with AH coming up tops at 83 per cent overall satisfaction.

KKH's chief executive Professor Ivy Ng said the hospital was providing more "holistic services by setting up more one-stop centres", such as the KK Eye Centre for children.

Surprisingly, AH's chief executive Liak Teng Lit said AH was "not particularly excited at the 83 per cent" since the ranking might raise expectations it could not meet. "If a patient is unhappy, he is 100-percent unhappy. Numbers can be meaningless for our unhappy patients."

Conducted by Media Research Consultants, the survey interviewed 9,100 patients from last August to December. They were asked to rank their responses on a scale of one to five.

The earlier customer satisfaction survey, conducted by the Institute of Service Excellence at the Singapore Management University, asked over 20,000 Singaporeans to rate their expectations and actual experiences on a scale of one to 10.