

DILEMMAS OF MEDICAL TOURISM



Medical tourism is a kind of evergreen topic and a booming sector of the tourism industry, but how important is it for a receiving country; does it pay off to invest in hospitals that provide these services?

These days, the market for medical care is growing, brought about by the high cost of care in developed countries. More and more people from the United States, Canada and Europe are traveling to exotic locations to be treated there. This is not only about cosmetic surgery or dentistry. Even very complicated surgeries such as heart transplants are done in the developing countries where they offer a high level of medical care for foreign tourists. For example, India is well established at this market. A study conducted by the Confederation of Indian Industry and McKinsey consultants estimated “medical tourism” could be worth over US\$2 billion by 2012, and, according to the study, the number of medical visitors to India is steadily growing.

The medical industry could be a good business to invest to. For instance, the Thai hospital Bumrungrad, a publicly traded company, reported at the end of 2005 that the hospital served more than a million patients from over 190 countries and it paid an impressive dividend to its shareholders.

There is also a hope that medical treatment of foreigners will bring benefits for the national medical services. For example, in the Caribbean, many state-owned hospitals have qualified staff, but are poorly equipped. The growth of medical tourism should make these hospitals attractive to foreign investors. Such foreign investments could improve the current facilities of health services for both the medical tourists and local population. Nevertheless, there is still a moral question; will the medical care be provided to the most needy or will the rich take preference?

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