

MEDICAL TOURISM AT RISK?



Medical tourism is a big industry these days. It grows rapidly but it also faces some troubles. It is still true that a surgery is cheaper in Asia than in the USA. Some American insurers even encourage their clients to go abroad to receive health care but these exotic detourments also have their own problems.

There is for example the case of Thailand. Local currency collapsed in 1997 and the Thai government decided to support the medical tourism industry because they hoped it will help the economy. The plan has worked and Thailand has become a popular medical tourism destination for certain surgeries. Perhaps, the best known medical tourism facility in this country is the Bumrungrad International Hospital in Bangkok. The hospital boasts it provides services to patients from more than 190 countries and it has an International Patient Center with interpreters for the foreigners.

The country, however, is not a symbol of political stability these days, which scares off many possible medical tourists. Mass demonstrations and fears of possible military intervention are definitely not a good image for a tourism destination. Another issue that worries medical tourism players even more is the current financial crisis. Especially businesses that are relying on American tourists witness a fall in visitors. The growing unemployment in the USA makes people postpone surgeries and non-emergency treatments. As a result, there are empty beds in Bumrungrad.

According to **Asian Medical Tourism Analysis (2008-2012)** (available at www.companiesandmarkets.com), Asia is the region with the biggest potential medical tourism market. The report also points out that the world's aging population represents an opportunity for the Asian medical tourism industry.

The Analysis dealt especially with Thailand, Singapore, India, Malaysia and Philippines. Singapore, for example, was presented as a rather expensive destination, in comparison with the other Asian states, but as a place where they have often better infrastructure and resources than are those in the west.

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