

HEALTH TOURISM: THAILAND PLANS TO BECOME ASIAN MEDICAL HUB



In 2013, 2.5 million medical tourists came to Thailand - spending the equivalent of 4 billion dollars - with such diverse origins as the UK, US, Gulf Arab States and Vietnam. Medical tourism is no new fad, with many patients travelling to foreign shores for a number of specialist treatments or perks they cannot receive at home, but the industry is reaching impressive heights in Thailand.

With this surge in popularity for Thai healthcare, it is no surprise that the government has made the industry a top priority; **in fact, it is a national goal that Thailand will become the biggest Asian medical hub in the next three years.** The increased interest from countries like Myanmar and Vietnam show that the wheels are already in motion.

The director of Bumrungrad International Hospital, Kenneth Mays, talks positively about the way the source countries' "economy is growing fast but the healthcare sector lags behind" - meaning even more money is likely to come the way of Thailand.

For many, it makes much more sense to fly over the borders to receive top quality treatment, pay lower prices and avoid long queues than to stay at home. What makes this trend even more interesting, and more appealing to its Thai supporters, is that many of these medical tourists are not after complex or specialist treatments and there is, therefore, a wide range of patients to treat.

Not Everyone Is Welcoming Medical Tourists with Open Arms

Obviously, this potential place on the global map is being seen as a positive step by many, and numerous supporters are encouraging governmental projects to increase growth in this area; however, there are also a number of protesters that see the negative side to the venture. It is worth remembering that medical tourism is a private sector that benefits foreign patients and while they get to enjoy the talents of doctors and lower costs, the Thai public may suffer from a lack of resources and increased prices.

Thailand prides itself on its skilled medics but hardly any foreign doctor is employed in the Thai hospitals. Thus, an already limited group of doctors may be stretched too far and taken out of the reach of the locals that need them just as much. Health Economics Research Director, Viroj Naranong, has echoed these concerns, going further by raising the potential problem of a lack of doctors to train the next generation, saying "with more and more patients coming in, it will draw a lot of resources ... especially from the teaching hospitals."

Is It the Right Approach for Thailand's Medical Industry?

With so much money entering the Thai economy and foreign tourists eagerly booking their flights to take advantage of the greater opportunities that the private clinics and hospitals can provide, it makes sense that **the government is keen to expand the sector and entice even more customers - and the goal of becoming Asia's medical hub seems to be achievable.**

The issue is whether this is the right focus for the the country to be adopting and while government proposals are understandable, so are the concerns for local healthcare and the long term effects on

the sector.

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