

# MEDICAL TOURISM CAUSING PROBLEMS IN THAILAND



Medical tourism is a profitable business in many countries. Patients from developed countries of Europe or North America travel to developing countries where the treatments are provided at considerably lower cost. There has, however, always been the question of ethics and morality. The private hospitals may make the health care unreachable for the locals. This is a problem that bothers officials in The Kingdom of Thailand these days.

In 2003 the country has launched a project to turn Thailand into a regional medical hub. Now, after five years, first effects of the project start to surface. The facts are however disturbing. Growing number of doctors as well as other staff is leaving the public health sector to work in private medical facilities. Even highly qualified experts from medical schools are nowadays leaving for the better paid positions in the private sector. So far there is not a research dealing with this issue. That is why the Public Health Ministry decided to conduct a study identifying the impacts of the development in the health care system.

The project had an unarguable positive effect on the Thai economy. According to Thinnakorn, the head of Human Resources for Health Research and Development Office, it attracts about Bt50 billion each year. The project aimed to boost three areas - sickness prevention, spa services and Thai massage. The private medical facilities are capitalizing on this. Millions of medical tourists are coming to the country and they bring vast sums of money to the economy. Nevertheless, the development has made doctors and medical staff quite wanted. Nowadays, the public health sector faces troubles as it encounters serious shortages in medical labor. According to a health ministry study an additional 176 to 303 private physicians will be needed by 2015. Even now the government spends much money to train doctors. They often however prefer to work in the private sector where the wages are better and the workload lower.

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