

30 per cent growth for Malaysia's medical tourism industry

Master plan to intensify promotion of health tourism in the country

By Brian Salter

THE issue of medical tourism within Malaysia is receiving growing attention as proponents and opponents of this developing industry battle it out in public debate.

As the overall tourism sector has recently taken a battering due to the worldwide economic slump, with Malaysia Airlines showing an 81 per cent drop in profits in the last quarter of 2008, the Health Ministry has said it will come up with a master plan to intensify promotion of health tourism in the country which is still showing positive growth.

Health Minister Datuk Seri Liow Tiong Lai is quoted as saying that last year alone, the industry had brought in some 370,000 foreign patients, generating about \$85 million in revenue for the country and he said he would discuss the matter soon with the Tourism Ministry and Malaysian Society for Quality in Health (MSQH) in order to draw up a proper framework and guideline for the industry.

"We want to promote the industry for economic reasons as we see it has so much potential that should be properly tapped. We ex-

pect the industry to continue to grow," he told reporters recently. "Over the years, the country's medical tourism industry has registered annual growth of 30 per cent," he added.

There are more than 50 countries whose governments promote medical tourism actively, many of them in Asia, with the annual growth of medical tourism estimated to be between 20 to 30 per cent. According to the Association of Private Hospitals of Malaysia, the number of foreign patients treated in their member hospitals increased from 102,946 in 2003 to 341,288 in 2007, with receipts of \$16.8 million and \$72.6 million respectively, with 72 per cent of the patients coming from Indonesia, 10 per cent from Singapore, 5 per cent from Japan and 4 per cent from India.

It's not hard to see the appeal for those from developed countries seeking medical treatment abroad. For example, open heart surgery can cost up to \$70,000 in the UK and double that in the US compared to \$18,000 in Malaysia; while a hysterectomy can cost \$30,000 in the US and US\$8,000 in Singapore compared to \$4,500 in Malaysia.

But some health experts are warning that the overall quality of healthcare in the country will suffer if medical tourism is allowed to

sap medical staff in public hospitals. The head of infectious diseases at University Malaya Medical Centre, Prof Dr Adeeba Kamarulzaman, has said that the lure of medical tourism could further lead to a brain drain, resulting in a lack of senior doctors and specialists to mentor younger medical staff.

"When that happens, the quality of staff produced would be low and those who leave for the private sector too would be of low quality. Without a check-and-balance on medical tourism, the public and the private sector would be affected as well," she said.

Meanwhile, a constant complaint of medical tourism proponents is about the perceived stringent guidelines of the Malaysian Medical Council (MMC). If the ministry decides to review these guidelines, which were drafted to protect the importance of healthcare and medical services, it is likely to call on all relevant stakeholders within the industry to be involved.

The guidelines were last reviewed in December 2007 and disallow the use of superlatives for any healthcare centre, contrary to counterparts abroad which can include a virtual tour of their facilities and testimonials from patients. ■



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