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## Promoting health and medical tourism to boost forex earnings

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MALAYSIA will exploit the relatively new sector of health and medical tourism, not just to take advantage of the excellent health care facilities but also to boost foreign exchange.

The Health Ministry has laid the groundwork and formulated guidelines with the aim of making Malaysia a destination for health-related activities and the centre of excellent medical treatment.

"All that is needed is aggressive promotion by the Government, private health care facilities, travel agencies and medical insurance groups," said an official from the Health Ministry.

Private hospitals have been chosen to lead the way as they have stronger manpower in terms of medical officers and specialists.

In 1997, the private sector registered 1,451 specialists and 4,600 medical officers compared to 964 and 3,755 in the public sector respectively. There are 210 private hospitals.

According to the Ministry official who declined to be identified, other countries that had developed health tourism to their economic advantage were the United Kingdom, the United States, Switzerland, France, Hungary, Costa Rica, Cuba, Singapore and the Philippines.

"In times of economic downturn, it makes sense if one subsector of the service industry, that is, health and medicine, can be nurtured and motivated to become a foreign exchange earner for Malaysia," she said.

"Why not capitalise on the excellent medical facilities which is undergoing major growth?"

"Cuba and Costa Rica have been promoting their health care services and have been successful in attracting a large number of health tourists at prices that are said to be a fraction of what they would cost in the United States."

Early this week, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had directed that tourism promotions be intensified and new products introduced.

In a meeting with Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Sabbaruddin Chik, Dr Mahathir had asked the industry to look into promoting health tourism, which is non-existent in the country at the moment.

This includes placing advertisements on health tourism, with the services and facilities offered by hospitals publicised.

To promote health tourism, facilities such as speedy visa approval, tax incentives and more advertising channels should be introduced.

The Ministry has reached an agreement with the Immigration Department to allow medical visitors to Malaysia to receive visa approvals in a week.

There are two ways to apply for visas; either apply in a person's home country or apply to the country itself.

However, for medical treatment, visitors or would-be patients can apply directly to the Immigration Department and have their visas approved in a week.

"This is a new policy set by the Immigration Department," the Health Ministry official, said, adding that patients who had identified the hospitals they were visiting could get them to apply for their visas.

"A concept called fast track has also been introduced, whereby the visiting patient can seek the assistance of an Immigration Department head at the point of entry for quick clearance," she added.

In late August, Health Minister Datuk Chua Jui Meng said patients and

relatives or friends accompanying them were now given priority in the renewal of visas or social visit passes if their stay extended beyond three months.

Normally, they are given a three-month social visit pass.

Chua said on a recommendation from the hospital concerned, the renewal process was patient-friendly in that the patient's next-of-kin could go to the Immigration Department on behalf of the patient.

Applications by the nationals of 13 countries which are required to obtain visas before entering Malaysia will also be expedited to enable patients to seek treatment here as soon as possible.

The target group for health tourism is the middle income earner. In most foreign countries, medical bills are paid for either by the health management organisations or the medical insurance companies of the employers. They are known as the payers and are also the target group.

"For most developed countries, medical facilities are available but Malaysia can now offer services of the same quality at cheaper prices," she said.

She gave the example of a simple lumpectomy which would take about 30 minutes and a half-day stay at the hospital.

News magazines like Asiaweek and the Far Eastern Economic Review have listed Malaysia as the cheapest destination for quality health care and medical treatment.

"Even with the whole treatment, flight ticket and hotel accommodation and a holiday to say Taman Negara, the cost would only be a quarter of what you would pay in Europe."

Developing countries like Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos, Iraq and other Middle Eastern countries which lack quality medical facilities are also the target group.

As with any new concept, success depends on its promotion and advertising. Realising this, the Ministry's Advertising and Medical Board has allowed private hospitals some flexibility.

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