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## Steps taken to promote medical tourism

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - In an effort to promote Malaysia as a "medical tourist" destination, immigration requirements for patients from other countries have been relaxed, Health Minister Datuk Chua Jui Meng said today.

For instance, patients can now "fast track" through immigration points at all international airports through a special lane allocated for them, while visa and social visit extensions can easily be obtained by the patients' relatives.

Chua said Malaysia was in the forefront within the region in using the latest state-of-the-art technology in medical and health care.

In addition, he said, treatment in Malaysia was cost-effective.

These factors, he said, would help the Health Ministry in promoting medical or health tourism.

"The private health sector in this country is one in which technology prevails and human medical skills are available to a high degree of sophistication," he told a news conference after launching the Stereotactic Radiosurgery and Radiotherapy Service at Pantai Medical Centre in Bangsar.

Also present at the launching ceremony was Hospital Pantai Bhd executive chairman Mokhzani Mahathir.

Chua said a committee on medical tourism under his Ministry had asked the private medical sector to provide feedback on the stumbling blocks within the system that would hinder the growth potential of medical tourism.

He said one such problem was the queuing up of patients at immigration checkpoints at all entry points into the country.

"Immigration checks have been greatly expedited through special lanes allocated for the sick," he said.

Chua added that patients required a fair bit of time to be treated and to recuperate before they returned to their home country.

"Patients and relatives or friends accompanying them are normally given a three-month social visit pass. However, now they are given priority in the renewal of visas or social visit passes if their stay extends beyond three months.

"On a recommendation from the hospital concerned, the renewal process is patient-friendly in that the patient's next-of-kin can go to the Immigration Department on behalf of the patient."

Applications by the nationals of 13 countries which require visas before entering Malaysia will also be expedited to allow for patients to seek treatment here as soon as possible.

Chua said although there were no statistics on how many foreign patients sought treatment in Malaysia annually, he said a "significant number" was seeking medical care in Malacca, Penang, Johor and Kuala Lumpur.

"We are happy to note that the Private Hospitals Association is now providing adequate information on Malaysia's private medical facilities on the Internet," he said.

Chua added that the other means of promoting medical tourism would be the introduction of "retirement villages" for elderly foreign patients.

"We encourage old people of certain financial standing to buy property in retirement villages set up by private hospitals.

"They can then live here on long stay passes issued by the Immigration

Department to recuperate or get away from the harsh winter conditions of their home country during certain months of the year," he said.

Explaining the stereotactic radiosurgery and radiotherapy service launched today, Chua said the treatment was a non-invasive alternative to open surgery for certain brain tumours and brain lesions.

The new method of treatment uses a state-of-the-art radiosurgery system called X-knife to deliver a localised dose of high energy radiation to the affected area.

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