

Research Summary

Medical Tourism in Thailand: Meeting Better the Needs of Japanese Tourists and Patients

Medical tourism - the combination of a holiday with medical or dental treatment - is a relatively new form of niche tourism which has attracted attention with its fast growth in recent years. Whereas Thailand has emerged as one of the leading medical tourism destination, Japan is a country whose citizens could gain significantly from the benefits offered by treating overseas. The aging population of Japan has imposed strains on the healthcare system in the country, and one way of solving the problem is by “outsourcing” some treatments to cheaper destinations with high quality of healthcare standards.

On the supply side, the major Thai hospital and clinics appear prepared for attending to Japanese patients. Most hospital facilities are new, with modern equipment and well-trained staff. Several major healthcare institutions have Japan-trained doctors, Japanese interpreters, and in one case a whole ward of a hospital dedicated to Japanese patients. Many hospitals websites provide detailed medical information in Japanese.

However, whereas most Japanese with treatment experience in Thailand remain highly satisfied with it, the Japanese public as a whole has remained skeptical of the idea of overseas medical treatment. Japanese patients are at present the largest group of foreign patients in Thailand, but most of them are expatriates in Thailand and not medical tourists. The reluctance to treat overseas is caused by a number of factors: lack of knowledge, fears of low quality, reluctance of Japanese doctors and institutions to recommend overseas medical procedures, the lack of follow-up treatment, fears of communication problems. An important factor is the fact that whereas medical costs in Japan are significantly higher, the lack of health insurance for Thailand makes treatment in this country more costly. Previous attempts of the Thai government to negotiate and extension of the medical insurance of Japanese citizens to Thailand have failed, but the authors of this report remain convinced that without such agreement attracting Japanese tourists as patients in Thailand will be difficult.

Another finding of this report is that foreign patients need reassurance in the quality of medical treatment and the relatively low risks involved in undertaking medical treatment overseas. This reassurance could come through international accreditations of hospitals, the adoption of certification system for medical travel agents, better regulation – and self-regulation – of the industry, and clearer and informative marketing campaigns. The risks of medical malpractice, and the lack of follow-up treatment in Japan, are other issues that need to be addressed urgently.

It is also crucial that Thai medical tourism providers – both in the healthcare and tourism industries – adopt a holistic approach to medical treatment through the provision of end-to-end health solutions, by the combination of medical treatment with relevant preventive and health-enhancing treatments, such as spa, yoga, Thai massage and other forms of traditional medicine.

Medical tourism is composed of two different industries – tourism and healthcare – with many stakeholders involved. To ensure the successful growth of medical travel, these stakeholders need to work closer together in developing industry standards, promoting medical travel and developing high value medical travel packages. Constructive cooperation in a competitive industry will ensure its success in providing benefits both to Thai institutions and the Japanese public.

Publication of the Results of Research Project:

Verbal Presentation (Date, Venue, Name of Conference, Title of Presentation, Presenter, etc.)

Phuket Medical Travel Seminar

Phuket, Thailand, 20 April 2007

Organised by the Faculty of Service Industries, Prince of Songkla University, and the Sumitomo Foundation

Medical Tourism in Thailand: Meeting Better the Needs of Japanese Tourists and Patients

Presenter: Aree Tirasatayapitak, Ph.D., Prince of Songkla University

Medical Travel: Opportunities for the Health Care and the Tourism Industries

Presenter: Ilian Assenov, Ph.D., Prince of Songkla University

Responsible Patient-Oriented Medical Travel

Presenter: Kanyarat Suthin, D.D.S., Ph.D., Prince of Songkla University

Proceedings of the 5th APac-CHRIE and the 13th Asia Pacific Tourism Association Joint Conference 24-27 May 2007, Beijing, China

Medical Travel: Can Supply Keep Up with the Demand?

Ilian Assenov, Ph.D., Prince of Songkla University

Kanyarat Suthin, D.D.S., Ph.D., Prince of Songkla University

Aree Tirasatayapitak, Ph.D., Prince of Songkla University

**Proceedings of the ATLAS SIG Spa and Wellness Tourism Meeting 2007
25 - 28 June 2007, Budapest, Hungary**

Factors Impeding the Growth of the Medical Travel Industry

Ilian Assenov, Ph.D., Prince of Songkla University

**Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on DESTINATION BRANDING AND
MARKETING: New Advances and Challenges for Practice
17-20 December 2007, Macao**

Branding Medical Tourism Destinations

Ilian Assenov, Ph.D., Prince of Songkla University

Thesis (Name of Journal and its Date, Title and Author of Thesis, etc.)

Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing (to be submitted)

Marketing Strategies for Medical Travellers: Patient Centered vs. Customer Centered

Ilian Assenov, Ph.D., Prince of Songkla University

Phuket Post

May issue (forthcoming)

Medical Travel: A New Opportunity for the Thai Healthcare and Tourism Industries

ThaiNews.com

Health Tourism Seminar by the Prince of Songkla University with the support of the Sumitomo Foundation of Japan

23 April 2007

http://www.thaisnews.com/news_detail.php?newsid=212889

(including a video coverage of the seminar)

Book (Publisher and Date of the Book, Title and Author of the Book, etc.)