

Travel for Health_ A Sell-out of Philippine Health Care

Medical tourism is but one form of globalization of health care – foreign doctors, foreign owned hospitals and medical facilities catering to foreign clients: a sell-out of the country's health care system to foreign big business that spells government abandonment of its responsibility to provide much needed health services to the people.

With a guidebook for medical tourists, which would be released internationally this October, there seems to be no stopping the sell-out of the country's health industry.

Besides a Medical Tourism Bill being on the legislative agenda, there are subtle indications that the government is bent on getting a slice of the booming medical tourism industry in the Asian region.

The Department of Health (DoH) has been frantic about the dollar-earning potential of medical tourism while purportedly intending to allocate its enormous potential revenue from this for the improvement of the public health care system.

According to the DoH, the "nascent yet promising" medical tourism industry has so far already earned about \$300 million since 2006, and is expected to earn as much \$1 billion by 2012.

Medical tourism is broadly defined as a health holiday along with a provision for cost-effective private medical care in collaboration with the tourism industry for patients needing surgical and/or other forms of specialized treatment.

The Philippines, since 2004, has been packaged as the next destination for medical tourism. This project is officially known as Medical Tourism Philippines (MTP). Initiated in 2004, it was only re-launched by the DoH in January 2006. MTP also involves the participation of health management organizations (HMOs).

Services vary from elective procedures like rhinoplasty (nose lift), liposuction, breast augmentation, orthodontics, to more serious and life-saving procedures such as joint replacements, bone marrow transplants, eye surgery, bariatric and cardiac bypass surgery among others.

Foreigners as market

Foreigners who want to avail of cheap surgical procedures are the main target market. For example, the cost of nasal injections is from P7,000 to P10,000 (\$171.57-\$245.10) as compared to a surgical noselift which will cost from P20,000 to P30,000 (\$490.20- to \$735.29). Besides being cheaper, patients are assured of the best doctors trained abroad while easily recovering in the most exotic spots in the country.

In recent reports according to Health Undersecretary Jade del Mundo, the country's health tourism sector covers 35 hospitals and stand-alone surgical facilities.

Leading private hospitals in the country like the Makati Medical Center, St. Luke's Medical Center, Metropolitan Hospital, Medical City are pilot centers for MTP. Five other government hospitals, namely Lung Center of the Philippines, Philippine Heart Center, National Kidney and Transplant Institute, Philippine Children's Medical Center, and East Avenue Medical Center have been included as venues for special procedures like kidney and heart transplant.

Bumrungrad International, the same company that runs the famed Bumrungrad Hospital in Thailand, since 2005 already purchased a controlling interest of 40-percent share of Asian Hospital.

Health officials claim that medical tourism could also alleviate the mass migration of health professionals as the demand for high paying jobs would surge in.

However, these have yet to be seen. In the meantime, hospitals around the country still suffer from lack of doctors and nurses. The Alliance of Health Workers (AHW) says that the government should start addressing the reason health professionals leave – low salary, poor working conditions and lack of job security.

Fundamentally wrong

There is something fundamentally wrong when a government starts offering "world-class" healthcare to foreign clients when it cannot even guarantee health for its people. In fact, more than 60 percent of Filipinos do not have access to primary health care and the leading causes of death are mostly treatable and preventable diseases.

Globalized health care

Under MTP, foreigners will be provided quality health care, while poor Filipino patients are likely to be neglected further. Priority will be given to these foreign patients with money to pay and thus services for charity patients will be decreased significantly.

At the Philippine Heart Center alone, an indigent patient wanting to undergo a heart transplant would have to wait for a grueling six months before he or she can be operated on. In the National Kidney and Transplant Institute, there is a heavy backlog of patients.

The full-scale implementation of MTP is seen to lead to the eventual foreign ownerships of hospitals and most segments of medical services in the country. The present moves of the Arroyo government to overhaul the Constitution would hasten such development.

Medical tourism is but one form of globalization of health care – foreign doctors, foreign owned hospitals and medical facilities catering to foreign clients: a sell-out of the country's health care system to foreign big business that spells government abandonment of its responsibility to provide much needed health services to the people.

BY PHILIP PARAAN
Contributed to Bulatlat
Vol. VII, No. 50, January 27-February 2, 2008

<http://kontakphilippines.tripod.com/kontakphilippinesweekly/id2.html>