

From hospitals to hospitality

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By Rachel Ranosa, AJ Press

Book a flight, pack your bags, go on your much-needed vacation-all while getting a tummy tuck or a hip replacement and a facial on the side.

While it may seem novel to some, the idea has in fact ignited the multibillion dollar global industry known today as health tourism.

The Philippines' contribution as a top wellness destination is highly anticipated, as it is long overdue.

Pampered

Health tourism combines your visit to the doctor with the relaxation and leisure offered in the Philippines' numerous world-class resorts and spas.

Whether the patient is recovering from a serious heart surgery or simply enjoying a rejuvenating massage, health tourism (also known as medical tourism) accords the patient the pampering absent even from the world's most advanced hospitals.

In his interview with the *Asian Journal*, Tourism Secretary Ace Durano revealed, "We have all the natural ingredients to be a great tourist destination and to be a serious player in this industry" from the quality of medical services to the scenic tourist spots in the country.

Bright spot

Health tourism is considered a bright spot for the Philippine economy amid this year's predicted slowdown.

In 2008, for instance, 100,000 foreign patients with an estimated spending power of US\$350 million sought either medical or cosmetic treatment in the Philippines. Patients from the United States, Europe, and the Middle East often save 50 to 70 percent on their expenses.

And even as the costs of airfare and accommodation are added to the hospital bill, the expenses incurred are still very minimal. The average cost of seeking treatment in destinations like the Philippines ranges from \$20, 000 to \$70, 000, a far cry from the price of medical treatment in the West.

Patients avail of the most innovative procedures in the country at a fraction of the price, and this, at the same time, boosts the Philippines' medical and tourism sectors.

Durano predicts that in five to ten years, the industry will be "ten times bigger than what it is today."

"[Health tourism] just requires a little push and the moment it gains momentum, it will have a life of its own," he added.

Tourism Usec. Cynthia Carrion also shared her forecast. "If we continue what we started, by 2012, we'll have as much as \$3 billion."

The world's best

Health tourism places Philippine medical and cosmetic treatment on equal footing with the world's best. The 4th World Health Tourism Congress, which was recently hosted by the Philippines, steers the country in the right direction.

"It's just one of those sectors where we have that natural competitiveness," Durano said.

Filipinos, after all, comprise the thousands of health care professionals working all over the world. The Philippines is proving it is indeed a force to reckon with. The country's top hospitals and wellness clinics converged with international medical tourism providers to address patients' hospital and travel needs.

Nurturing, healing

Other Asian countries such as Singapore, South Korea and Thailand have made their mark as pioneers in the industry, since the advent of medical tourism in the late 90's.

It is, however, the nurturing character of the Pinoy that carves out the Philippines' niche in the global health tourism market. The Filipino culture of nurturance, according to Durano, "humanizes medicine."

Carrion also believes the Filipino idea of wellness is holistic and spiritual.

"When a Filipino massages you with the *hilot*, it's not only a relaxing massage, it's also therapeutic. It's healing you," she explained.

"They come here and after vacationing they come back and they look younger," Carrion added.

Beyond the usual postcard idea of relaxing in a tropical destination, health tourism sets foreign patients and *balikbayans* on the road to wellness faster, as the experience is immersed in the nurturance and prayerfulness of Filipinos.

And as the undersecretary pointed out, "We have to let the world know about it."