

Healing in the heart of asia: The Philippines rises as the new hub

May 11, 2009, 4:43pm



If you build it, they will come.

One can surmise how much those famous words have helped push many ventures to fruition. Whether it's on celluloid or in real life, there's no arguing with the timeless axiom's weight and effectiveness in simply getting things done. After all, the formula behind it is simple: vision plus pro-activeness plus faith equals success.

Given that, it is apparent that such a formula was at work during the 4th World Health Tourism Congress (WHTC) hosted by the DOT (Department of Tourism). In light of the DOT's efforts to promote the Philippines as the new medical hub of Asia, the event brought corporate and institutional buyers from all over the world to network with local solution providers.

So true to the adage above, it was a clear case of "if you host it, they will come" – because come they did. A number of foreign delegates flew in for the event in search of potential partners who can provide quality and affordable healthcare alternatives for their fellow citizens.

Held at the Sofitel Philippine Plaza last March 26-28, 2009, the WHTC saw health officials and executives from companies hailing from the Middle East, the United States, Europe and Australia. Among these were Continental Medical Solutions, Global Med Choices LLC, Health Travel Guides, the Federal Ministry of Health Sudan, Kapico Travels & Tourism, the Ministry of Health Libya, National Health Insurance (Daman), Qatar Insurance Company, Resort Destination Marketing LLC, the Saudi Armed Forces Medical Services and Surgery Planet.

Local providers from hospitals and clinics, medical travel facilitators, spas, health resorts, ambulance companies, as well as tourist agencies participated as well. Among them were The Medical City, St. Luke's Medical Center, George Dewey Medical Center, Makati Medical Center, Asian Hospital and Medical Center, Asian Eye Institute, Health and Leisure-Gulf Express Corp., The Zen Institute (Medical Spa), Capitol Medical Center, Global Vital Source, Manila Doctor's Hospital, Medical Center Manila, National Kidney and Transplant Institute, Philippine Heart Center, St. Frances Cabrini Medical Center, Tagaytay Hospitals, University of Sto. Tomas Hospital, World Citi Medical Center, Philippine Retirement Authority, Noli Center for Alzheimer's and Elderly Care, Philippine Dental Association, Cebu Doctor's Hospital, Chong Hua Hospital and Perpetual Succour Hospital.

However, beyond the attendance of foreign delegates, the WHTC marked a major step for the Philippines as it emerges as a prime player in the medical tourism industry. With the global economic downturn prompting many developed countries to look elsewhere for more affordable – yet quality – health care, the Philippines' hosting of the WHTC came at a very opportune time.

"This Congress is an opportunity, a potential tipping point, for us to give major decision makers in the global health industry a convincing glimpse of our capabilities to meet their clientele's needs," said DOT Secretary Joseph Ace Durano. "At the same time, this is the perfect time for us to reinforce our reputation as a

passionate and caring people, which of course, is what humanizes medicine and makes the big difference in the wellbeing of a patient.”

A big question loomed over the thoughts of many delegates, one that was left unasked in the interest of propriety. But still, it was a valid question: how does the Philippines, a developing country, present itself as a place for developed nations to send their ill?

This query was something that Medical City President and CEO Dr. Alfredo Bengzon brought up during the plenary session that kicked off the three-day event. And his answer: “This Congress gives us the opportunity to put it all together.”

True enough, the Congress was able to answer the query through the conferences and B2B (business to business) sessions – pre-arranged one-on-one meetings between buyers and providers – where the country’s topnotch services, facilities and expertise were presented as one integrated strength. Several providers offered their services in packages that covered everything from travel, lodging, tours with the medical component at its core.

The diverse set of providers at the WHTC answers the needs of many medical travelers who wish to get treatment overseas and go on vacation as part of their recovery. Delegates looking for hospitals were also able to network with travel agencies, wellness spas, retirement homes and other specialist centers with which they can consider sending their patients, too, as part of an entire package trip.

Quality, professionalism, hospitality, availability – when it came to expectations, almost all of the delegates had similar ones in mind. Because just as they are searching for affordable alternatives, they still want the best for their patients.

As the Philippines vies for a large share of the medical tourism market, all these come into play, presenting the country as a one-stop health shop. “We have all the necessary ingredients to succeed,” said Secretary Joseph Ace Durano. “It just requires a little push and then it’ll have a life of its own.”