

RP medical tourism lures visitors with its less-expensive services

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THE Philippines is taking advantage of the global financial crisis by offering less-expensive medical treatments and wellness facilities to rich aging citizens in the US and Europe, as well as rich Arab and African states, as their economies suffer huge cuts in state funding for health and social services.

Hadi Malaeb, chairman of the World Health Tourism Congress, said the biggest market for health tourism are the rich Arab economies and African countries that allocate huge state budgets for medical treatment of their nationals.

The Philippines' Department of Tourism, which hosted the Fourth World Health Tourism Congress in Manila over the weekend, said the country is targeting a \$3.5-billion market for medical and wellness tourism by 2012.

"Our biggest market includes the corporate buyers... these are the health ministries of Arab and African countries with dedicated budget for their nationals who need [medical] treatment abroad. They constitute the largest category," said Malaeb in his speech at the opening of the forum held on Friday at the Hotel Sofitel in Pasay City.

He cited that two private hospitals in the Philippines won \$5-million-worth service contract with an Arab state last year. The contracts constitute medical treatments for 80 patients to be sent to the country.

Three other market categories for medical and health tourism include international insurance companies, medical facilitators and the general public.

The departments of health and tourism, as well as the Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry (PCCI), have agreed that the Philippines is now in the best position to take advantage of the global financial crisis to attract Arab and African countries and international insurance companies to avail themselves of the less-expensive medical and wellness treatments.

"The global financial crisis is affecting us in a favorable way," said Samie Lim, PCCI vice chairman and head of the tourism committee, in an interview at the sidelines of the forum.

He said the crisis is prompting both rich economies and international insurance companies to "cut cost" in providing medical expenses for their nationals and clients, respectively.

"The Philippines offers reasonably priced medical care and facilities... half the price of those in the US and Europe and even 80 percent lesser for dental services," said Lim.

Tourism Secretary Ace Durano said, "The global financial crisis is opening a window of opportunity for both general tourism and medical tourism as international insurance companies look for greater value but same service for their clients at lower costs."

He said more business opportunities in medical tourism will also translate to creation of thousands of jobs for Filipinos, specifically those in the health and services sectors. These include doctors, nurses and caregivers, as well as hotel staff.

At the same time, Lim said the biggest market for the Philippines are the oil-rich member-countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) that include Saudi, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman.

He said, for instance, the government of Bahrain is now subcontracting its social services to private hospitals in the Philippines, including St. Luke's Medical Center.

Another market for the Philippine medical and health tourism sector are rich Russian tourists and retirees, who are now looking for tropical destinations due to the harsh effects of global warming that bring them longer and more severe winters.

"Cebu hotel and resort operators are now targeting Russian tourists as they are known to be big spenders," said Lim.