

Upgrading of health care facilities, services key to tapping industry's potentials

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Expansion and upgrading of health and wellness facilities are key to getting a bigger chunk of the medical tourism market and to provide jobs for the Filipinos.

Tourism secretary Joseph H. Durano said yesterday that his department is promoting business-to-business interaction among industry stakeholders here and abroad in order to encourage further investments in hospitals and spas because it could provide more employment opportunities as well as attract more medical tourists to the country.

"Providing employment opportunities in the country for Filipino medical professionals is just one benefit of a growing medical tourism sector. Another benefit is it provides another growth sector to construction and real estate development companies, as investments pour in to expand existing medical facilities and develop new ones," said Mr. Durano in "text" message.

The government considers medical tourism as one bright spot amid the general economic slump. In medical tourism, foreigners can seek medical or wellness services outside of their own country at the same quality but a fraction of the cost.

Mr. Durano noted this is why even top Filipino business are going into the industry. Just last February, for instance, Colinas Verdes Hospital Managers Corp.-a unit of Metro Pacific Investments Corp.-signed a contract with the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Manila to manage the church-owned Cardinal Santos Medical Center for two decades, starting last March 1, following an interim, six-month deal to run the San Juan Hospital.

Under the deal, Colinas will set aside an initial budget of 250 million for the first three years of operation to upgrade the hospital's facilities and enhance services.

The tourism department said that it wants to send the message that qualify, affordable health care and wellness is available in the Philippines, and has been working with various sectors to provide a favorable environment for investors in pushing for the International accreditation of hospitals.

Both government and industry have been holding promotion initiatives, the latest being to host the 4th World Health Tourism Congress in Manila last month that provided a forum for meetings among companies and groups from the Middle East, the United States, Europe, Australia, and the Philippines.

Not just hospitals

A host of Philippine firms and groups participated in that event, including The Medical City, Saint Luke's Medical Center, Makati Medical Center, Manila Doctor's Hospital, Medical Center Manila, National Kidney and Transplant Institute, Philippine Heart's Center and Cebu Doctor's Hospital. Hospitals like St. Luke's Medical Center and The Medical City already offer medical tourism packages.

The industry also includes groups outside hospitals that have recognized the bright potentials of the business.

"During these challenging financial times, the medical tourism remains a bright spot for the Philippines since we are talking about a \$21 billion global industry," read a statement of the Belo Medical Group last weekend.

The Spa Association of the Philippines, Inc. (SAPi) said that it is targeting "the high-end market because they have the money to travel [more-frequently]," but also understands that health and wellness tourism should also serve those looking for affordable treatments.

"Like hospitals, we believe that spas are recession proof because people would want to relax and forget their problems," said former SAPi President Jomar Fleras in a telephone interview yesterday.

He added that SAPi is working with the department to promote Philippine medical and wellness tourism in international exhibits.

The tourism department said that it is targeting 200, 000 medical tourist by 2012. Data from the department showed that 100, 000 foreign patients sought treatment in the country last year, a 67% increase from the 60, 000 patients in 2007.

The department is also targeting sales of \$300 million this year, to reach \$3 billion in 2012. "Last year, we got around 200 million from medical tourism and for this we are targeting more or less \$300 million," Tourism Undersecretary for Sports Tourism and Wellness Cynthia Carrion said in a telephone interview yesterday.

Ms. Carrion explained that it is not only cosmetic procedures that bring foreign patients to the country but also other medical treatments. She noted, for instance, that one specialized institute earned \$12 million from foreign patients last year.