

New phrase in medical lexicon

Dato' Dzul kifli Abd Razak

Article

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HEALTH or medical tourism seems to be a new phrase in medical lexicon. Though it sounds oxymoronic, it is not so, when tourist dollars are associated with it.

One Internet source describes medical tourism as the practice of visiting countries with low prices and buying services in their private hospitals or healthcare centers.

Another less popular understanding is the case where tourists travel to less-developed countries to offer their medical services at a cost.

Some claim that medical tourism is not new, citing that in ancient Greece, pilgrims and patients came from all over of the Mediterranean to the sanctuary of the healing god, Asklepios, at Epidaurus.

And in Roman Britain, patients took the waters at a shrine at Bath, a practice that continued for 2,000 years.

Many Asian nations feature medical tourism as part of their tourist packages. For example Thailand reportedly drew an estimated one million medical tourists last year alone. Singapore allegedly has set itself a similar target by 2012.

Malaysia, too is embarking on similar options; after all, it too has well-equipped hospitals, with state of the art facilities, and very competent professionals.

Such would be the case when one dabbles in the area of cosmetic reasons without any underlying medical or health needs; more specifically when vanity takes over, disguised as a package, so-called medical tourism.

A recent report puts Penang as "the best city in the region for the breast-enhancement" for the example, not an "expertise" that one can be proud of in today's post-genomic medical world.

What is not advertised is a number of problems associated with medical tourism, including follow-up care.

Thus, complications, side-effects and post-operative care when needed are passed on to healthcare system in the patient's home country as document by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention relating to "tummy tucks," liposuction and breast surgeries.

Moreover, most of the countries that offer medical tourism have weak malpractice laws.

Another serious concern is the growing accusations that profitable, private-sector medical tourism is drawing medical resources and personnel away from the local population, especially when there is also a disparity in the health care system.

Overall, medical tourism, unlike other forms of tourism is subjected to the fundamental principle of "first do no harm."

With medical tourism, the ethical question that needs to be asked is: "whether you are treating the patient for your own good or for theirs," medically speaking, of course.

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