

'Seamless healthcare will boost medical tourism'

ACCESS: Boost ecosystem, connectivity of industry, says expert

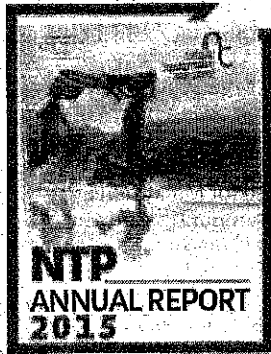
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A HOLISTIC healthcare package must be made available to medical tourists to boost the industry and provide quality healthcare services, medical experts said.

Former Malaysian Medical Association (MMA) president Datuk Dr N.K.S. Tharmaseelan said Malaysia is renowned globally for its tourist attractions and quality healthcare.

He was commenting on the National Transformation Programme (NTP) annual report, which revealed that Malaysia generated RM588.6 million in healthcare travel revenue from January to September last year.

The biggest market was Indonesia, making up 62 per cent of the healthcare revenue, followed by the Middle East (7.4 per cent), India (3.3 per cent), China (2.6 per cent), Japan (2.6 per cent), Australia and New Zealand (2.5 per cent) and the



United Kingdom (2.5 per cent).

Dr Tharmaseelan said Malaysia should provide a holistic medical experience by improving the connectivity and ecosystem of the healthcare sector.

"We need to provide a seamless healthcare experience for health tourists, which includes transfer from their home country to the airport, hotel and hospital here.

"The Immigration Department must provide easy access to visa renewal and extended visas to those requiring extended care. Or maybe do away with visas for health tourists.

"There should also be a one-stop government agency to look into the needs of these tourists," he told the *New Straits Times*.

He said major airports must be more tourist friendly, and concierges and lounges should be

set up to provide services, such as helicopter transfer.

He said the healthcare industry should collaborate with hotels and wellness centres that offered recovery packages for medical tourists to recuperate in comfort.

"We must provide post-treatment care. If patients are unable to stay in Malaysia, we need to link them up with a doctor of hospital in their home country for post-treatment care and follow-up treatment."

However, Federation of Private Medical Practitioners' Associations Malaysia president Dr Steven Chow said Malaysia must provide good healthcare services to its citizens before thinking of prioritising healthcare tourism.

"We want to see the studies that show evidence that increased health tourism income improves delivery of healthcare to the people."

Dr Chow said healthcare tourism was a major driver of commercialised medicine, as opposed to a socialised system where the priority was universal access to a quality and compassionate healthcare system with a safety net for the poor and marginalised.

In a commercialised system, he said, the focus was on return on in-

vestments, escalating profits and growth of corporate wealth, which could not be the philosophy for national healthcare.

"The government has to allocate more budget for healthcare and stamp out leakages to ensure that the money is well spent.

"Quality healthcare in public hospitals should be made accessible to the needy by cutting red tape. Private healthcare cost should be closely monitored and controlled with the market forces and regulatory machineries."

MMA president Dr Ashok Zachariah Philip said the country's healthcare system was good, with excellent facilities at reasonable prices.

The Malaysian Healthcare Travel Council, he said, was doing a good job of promoting Malaysian healthcare abroad.

"However, we must ensure that patients' wellbeing, not profit-making, remains a priority. If we are not ethical, no amount of marketing will help."

The NTP report stated that the projected growth in healthcare tourist arrivals this year was to come from the Middle East, Australia, New Zealand, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Myanmar and Singapore.



Datuk Dr N.K.S. Tharmaseelan