

# Patient testimonials should be allowed in promoting medical tourism

**FOCUS** 

Sunday, 09 Feb 2020



**Dr Kuljit Singh: 'If testimonials are still not allowed, Malaysia as a medical tourism destination will continue to be at a disadvantage.'**

EFFORTS to promote Malaysia as a healthcare travel centre are welcomed.

But some experts in the field are hoping the government will allow patient testimonials to be included in advertisements for medical services.

The Association of Private Hospitals of Malaysia hopes the Medicines (Advertisement and Sale) Act 1956 will be reviewed as part of the blueprint being developed by the Malaysia Healthcare Travel Council (MHTC).

Testimonials of treatment outcome by the patients should be allowed, says association president Datuk Dr Kuljit Singh.

He explains that the blueprint would only be effective in attracting medical tourists if they know what our doctors are capable of.

“Medical tourists who come here for treatment do so because of word of mouth.

“If testimonials are still not allowed, Malaysia as a medical tourism destination will continue to be at a disadvantage compared with Singapore and Thailand although our fees are much cheaper,” he says, adding that medical tourists today are much savvier, more sceptical and have many options available.

Although the majority of Malaysian doctors are very professional, speak English fluently and are trained abroad, their professional abilities and quality of care are not known because patient testimonials are not allowed in advertisements, unlike in other countries.

“As it is, the Health Ministry will have to approve every hospital advertisement we run so there are already safeguards in place to protect the patient.

“There may be some bad apples who oversell themselves but if we have guidelines in place, doctors and hospitals will know what can and cannot be said in a testimonial,” he says.

Welcoming the healthcare industry blueprint, Malaysian Medical Association president Dr N. Ganabaskaran says this country is one of the best places to seek medical treatment.

“The cost of treatments is very affordable and we have some of the best specialists in the region.

“We welcome all medical tourists and at the same time, they can take the time to sightsee and partake in our delicious local food,” he says.

Dr Ganabaskaran also hopes there can be more promotional work to inform overseas patients of what Malaysia has to offer.

“If there are no advertisements, people will not know of our strengths. Some hospitals in Singapore and Thailand are famous because they spent a lot of money on marketing.

“Malaysian hospitals should be allowed to advertise to attract more medical tourists,” he says.

On whether the novel coronavirus outbreak will affect medical tourism, Dr Ganabaskaran says it isn't a huge cause for concern as Malaysia has the necessary means to control its spread.

“The ministry and our healthcare facilities will take the necessary precautions,” he says.

Some believe the government's priority should be to boost healthcare for Malaysians, instead of promoting healthcare tourism.

Federation of Malaysian Consumers Associations CEO Datuk Paul Selvaraj feels that the government should focus more on improving public healthcare.

He says more healthcare tourists would result in many of the country's top specialists flocking to join the private sector.

"As it is, there are more specialists in the private sector compared with government hospitals.

"Specialists in the private sector cater to a much smaller population whereas their public sector counterparts are overburdened with a never-ending stream of patients to see daily.

"Growing healthcare tourism could result in that burden becoming even greater.

"The government won't be able to pay specialists as much as the private sector and they will end up leaving," he says, adding that some 65% of Malaysians seek treatment at government hospitals but 70% of the country's specialists are in the private sector.

Malaysian Association of Hotels CEO Yap Lip Seng says a main concern to be addressed is the country's domestic healthcare needs.

"Domestic medical tourism is a huge untapped market," he points out.

"The blueprint has to ensure that locals do not lose out, and that medical tourism should be affordable for locals while being competitive internationally."

The Malaysia Healthcare Industry Blueprint (2020-2025) should address our medical tourism's carrying capacity, taking into consideration possible collaborations with other industry stakeholders such as hotels, he says.

"We can complement each other and grow the medical tourism sector."

Malaysian Association of Tour and Travel Agents (MATTA) president Datuk Tan Kok Liang says the MHTC should work closely with its members, particularly in the planning of transfers and tours.

"The blueprint should make MATTA's role clear – leave this service to us. It's our forte.

"MHTC must ensure that unlicensed tour and transport operators are dealt with in the blueprint so that medical tourists feel safe and secure. This is necessary to protect the country's image and reputation."

He says the blueprint should also address technological advances such as artificial intelligence and big data to improve the patient's overall experience.

"To boost medical tourism, we need innovation.

"From the utilisation of social media to promote the country and facilitate travel arrangements, to providing more accurate diagnostics and easy transfer of medical records, digital solutions can play a bigger role.

"Hopefully the blueprint encourages the use of technology among all stakeholders."

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