Taiwan cashes in on medical tourism (The Straits Times, Singapore / Asia News Network)

By Lee Seok Hwa, The Straits Times, Singapore / Asia News Network

Nov 12 -TAIPEI -- Taiwan will go all out to develop its medical tourism sector from next year, with plans to build five hubs around the island and an advertising blitz on the bid, a senior official told The Straits Times.

The island hopes to catch up with established players such as Thailand and Singapore and grab a greater slice of the global medical travel pie, which is estimated to be worth US$450 billion and is growing up to 34 per cent every year.

Given Taiwan's proximity to China and their cultural affinity, the drive could draw away Singapore's potential mainland Chinese patients, who account for an increasing number of medical tourists.

In an exclusive interview with The Straits Times, Dr Wu Ming-yan, who heads the Taiwan Task Force for Medical Travel -- a semi-official agency charged with promoting the industry -- said that the first of the five hubs will be built on a 22ha site next to Taoyuan International Airport, with investment estimated at NT$10 billion (US$333 million).

Called the Taoyuan Medical Zone, the hub will feature a 600-bed hospital as well as hotels, shopping malls and entertainment facilities.

"What we are offering is a one-stop service from pick-up at the airport to surgery to sightseeing," Dr Wu said.

Consciousness from Singapore, Hong Kong and the United States will be invited to bid for the project early next year, he added, and construction is expected to wrap up in two to three years' time.

Dr Wu is due to pitch the Taoyuan plan to Parkway Holdings, which has a network of 16 hospitals in Asia, and Temasek Holdings when he visits Singapore from Nov 22 to Nov 24 as part of an official delegation sent to draw investments. He also disclosed that the other medical tourism zones are planned for Taichung in central Taiwan and Kaohsiung and Tainan in the south.

Another one, to be set up in Hsinchu, Taiwan's high-tech base, will focus on biomedical research, with tourism as an ancillary feature.

A special programme on medical tourism in Taiwan will air on the Discovery Channel next year.

Also on the cards is a guidebook, Patients Beyond Borders, is simplified Chinese characters to target the mainland market.

The Taiwan edition of the book is in the series that American researcher Joel Woodman first published in 2006.

Taiwan started to develop its medical tourism sector in earnest only three years ago, and lags behind regional leaders Thailand and Singapore. It also has to compete with other up-and-coming destinations such as South Korea, Malaysia and India.

This year, the number of foreign medical tourists visiting Taiwan is expected to surpass 90,000, with contributions amounting to about NT$5 billion, said Dr Wu.

Singapore attracts more than 400,000 patients a year while in Thailand, the Burmahong Specialist Hospital claims to have treated 420,000 patients in 2008.

One major handicap Taiwan faces is that it is not as cosmopolitan as, say, Singapore and relatively few people speak English fluently.

Ms Susie Lia, a customer service coordinator with Chang Gung Memorial Hospital's International Service Centre, said a local woman who accompanied her daughter to Taiwan for reproductive treatment relapsed on oranges for four days because of the lack of halal food there.

"She ended up with health problems of her own," Ms Lia said.

Even then, the woman refused to be treated by a nurse doctor and insisted on having her blood pressure taken by her son still covered by her Islamic gown.

But, as Mr Woodman told a press briefing organized by the task force, Taiwan has one major edge: geography.

"Taiwan is closer to China than any other Asian country, and offers a wide range of medical treatments that are not available in other countries," he said.

"Once we convince them that Taiwan is the place to go for treatment, they will come back for more, and we will continue to build on their trust," Mr Woodman added.

Mr Woodman noted that Taiwan is the only Asian country with a direct flight to Australia, and that 80 per cent of tourists to Taiwan are from the region.

Mr Woodman also said that Taiwan has a unique advantage: it is not considered a part of China.

Still, both experts said Taiwan's push must not pose a threat to other players because each has a different niche and caters to different markets.

Singapore has a reputation for cancer and tumour treatment, and stem cell therapy, and draws mostly South-east Asian customers, noted Mr Woodman.

Taiwan is famed for its cosmetic and transplantsurgery, India is known for orthopaedics and rock-bottom prices.

Taiwan would do well to also build its own niche, such as cardiovascular treatment, reconstructive facial surgery, and traditional Chinese medicine while leveraging on its technological advantage, said Mr Woodman.

"There's something for everybody," he said.

The edge

- Competitive prices: Treatment costs are as much as one-third cheaper than Singapore's, says Dr Wu Ming-yan, head of Taiwan's medical travel task force. For example, a lung donor liver transplant costs US$190,000, compared to US$500,000 in Singapore and at least US$500,000 in the US.

- Language: Mandarin-speaking environment is attractive to mainland Chinese and overseas Chinese.

- Technology: Ubiquitous electronic records system translates to shorter waiting time.

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