

Checking Into Japan

The market for “medical tourism” is growing rapidly in Japan. Miho Kawasaki reports.

A According to a study by the National Center for Policy Analysis in the United States, the world market for medical tourism was valued at about 60 billion dollars in 2006, and that number is expected to grow to about 100 billion dollars by 2012. The New Growth Strategy decided on by the Japanese Government in June of 2010 has also set targets under which Japan, by 2020, will attempt to gain a top-level reputation and position in Asia in the field of medical tourism.

According to Yoji Kitamura, director of the Medical Tourism Promotion Office at the Japan Tourism Agency (JTA), “Japan’s medical technologies rank at the world’s highest levels, and medical care is affordable in Japan when compared with the West. We’re conducting studies to determine, for instance, how well we can meet the needs of international patients by offering access to medical therapies available readily in Japan but only rarely in other countries, including particle radiotherapies, or the thorough, overnight medical examinations known as ‘ningen dock.’”

Promotion efforts are already underway overseas, led by the JTA. Japanese doctors are being sent to other countries, where they will explain medical therapies available in Japan. Health screening tours are already gaining in popularity. In April of 2009, for example, Nippon Travel Agency Co. began forging ties between local travel agencies in China and do-

mestic Japanese medical institutions to offer travel packages which featured a two-day, overnight health screening using positron emission tomography (PET) combined with a tour of Japan lasting four to five days. A spokesperson at NTA’s public relations department notes that “with our packages so popular and the number of participants rising even after autumn, we expect to surpass our target for the year of 200 participants.”

Meanwhile, local governments are proceeding with efforts of their own. The mortality rate in Japan from diabetes is highest in Tokushima Prefecture, where the prefectural government, universities and business firms aim to create a world-class clinical center for diabetes research and treatment development as Tokushima University plays a main role. Medical tours offering access to full-service health screening facilities are already being promoted, and in May of 2010, the first group of medical tourists was welcomed from Shanghai, China.

The JTA’s Kitamura notes that “plenty of local governments are working to develop their medical tourism options, beginning with health examination services for patients from China. It would be ideal if people from as many countries as possible visited Japan for medical services while enjoying a tour of the country at the same time, and we aim to encourage it.”

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