



Only the Best for His Father Trusting Thai Doctors to Treat His Father's Heart Condition
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Mr. Hai Phan is confident his 78-year old father, Luan Van, is in good hands – getting the attention he needs for a serious heart condition. Mr. Phan lives in Boston; his father lives in Vietnam, where he owns a rubber company called Bin Phuoc Rubber. “The hospital Bumrungrad has given my father great treatment,” said Mr. Phan.

Mr. Phan pays out of pocket to send his father from Vietnam to Bumrungrad International hospital in Bangkok, Thailand for treatment, after Luan Van suffered a heart attack and three clogged vessels needed close attention. Mr. Phan didn’t trust Vietnamese hospitals to provide quality care that was clean, safe and timely.

“I was introduced to the hospital through a friend in Germany who also had a relative who was treated at Bumrungrad,” Mr. Phan said. Many of Bumrungrad’s doctors have practiced in the U.S. and were educated there; Mr. Phan was also comforted by the information he found on the hospital’s web site. “Online, I can see the biography and activity of the hospital, and the reviews by the patients, and how people from all over the world, even places in China, come to get treated.”

Traveling for health care is happening more and more, fueling an industry known in the U.S. as “medical tourism”. Because health care is so expensive in the U.S., patients are researching hospitals like world famous Bumrungrad International in Thailand, St. Luke’s Medical Center in the Philippines, Apollo Hospitals Chennai in India, and others in South Africa, Brazil, and Mexico to save money and get quality care. Many medical travelers are immigrants and their family members, who combine visits to the home country with visits to the doctor.

“There is usually no waiting period, allowing patients to fly in and have the surgery done the next day in most cases. Most hospitals also have impressive hospitality staff and a more personalized service,” according to discovermedicaltourism.com, which describes itself as a community web site to educate people about medical tourism. A Deloitte report found that, by 2017, more than 23 million Americans could be traveling offshore to seek health care services. Despite all of this, at this point, many hesitate, worried about things like language barriers.

Mr. Phan was comfortable sending his father to Bumrungrad. He explained, “There are over 600 doctors, most of whom are fluent in English, and there are even Vietnamese employees. There are English translators and Vietnamese translators. I think there are about a bit over 1% of the total patient base are Vietnamese. Even at the Bangkok airport, the hospital Bumrungrad also has a contact point for clients from far and wide, so that they can get an emergency vehicle or a van to take them to their hotel, as long as they spend at least \$250 in treatment.”

Curiosity About Cost Savings

Mr. Phan came to the U.S. in 1981, so initially, he thought of flying his father to the East Coast for treatment at JFK Medical Center in New Jersey. However, he was told that he would have to sign a cashier’s check of \$250,000 to prepare him for treatment there. Mr. Phan was also worried about visa clearance for the visit.

By sending his father to Bangkok’s Bumrungrad, Mr. Phan paid \$30,000 instead. The hospital’s financial department told him that every patient starts with a 20% deposit and pays the balance when treatment is finished. The buzz about cost savings, and the uncertainty of U.S. health care reform, has many Americans asking a lot of questions.

Knowing this, governments are getting involved in the promotion of medical tourism in the U.S. One of the key selling points is the transparency of cost; it’s common for overseas hospitals to be specific about costs in advance, which are almost always a small fraction of what the same procedure would cost in America. Curious to learn how other countries and hospitals have been successful in providing care to the masses, a U.S. congressional delegation just returned from touring Bumrungrad. Also, the Korean government has been very aggressive in marketing its health care system to U.S. patients, often sending teams of hospital representatives to various U.S. health events to sell its services.

An Eye on Quality

Aware of the increasing American interest in traveling for health care, and concerned about misinformation, a Florida-based organization, the Medical Tourism Association (MTA), has positioned itself as an educational watchdog. The MTA just released the results of a survey in May 2010, based on the experiences of American patients at Bumrungrad:

- 93% rated the hospital as “very good” or “excellent”
- 80% felt their health care was more personalized than in the US
- 82% would recommend to friends, family and acquaintances that they also travel for medical care
- 88% said they would travel internationally again for care

More than half of the patients surveyed rated their experience better than it would have been in the U.S. and felt “very safe”.

A Standard of Service and Amenities

Mr. Phan felt the same way when he accompanied his father to Bumrungrad this past summer. "This hospital has a team of service people in three big buildings," he said. "The emergency room and all the examination rooms are international standard, along with the dental, the drug center and the pharmacy. There is the cafeteria, the restaurant and all the places to rest that have a contract with the hospital and a lot of people say that it's like going on a vacation to get your treatment. It's like recuperating, resting, and traveling."

Ken Mays, the West Coast expatriate who lives in Bangkok and serves as Bumrungrad's Director of Marketing and Business Development says, "We also have a one-to-one nurse ratio for ICUs and critical care; for general wards the ratio is one-to-2.6."

What's Next for U.S. Citizens?

If U.S. health care reform does not deliver on its promises, will offshore health care systems see a boost in patient numbers? Will people open up to the idea of flying for elective surgery or routine physicals? And, even if reform does succeed, will more people accessing the system mean a decline in quality? Longer wait times? Although it is too early to tell, reform forces all residents to rethink what we expect of our health care system. The success of medical tourism, even if one chooses never to travel, may at least help us take a specific look at costs, care and the experiences of those we trust to choose what's best for our lives and our families.

Julie Pham

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