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What does 'Bumrun' mean?

This Thai word - pronounced Bahm-roong-RAHT - means "care for the people"

Hospitals around the world are drawing new patients with topnotch doctors, high-tech equipment and low costs. These 10 are leaders in their fields.

Oct. 30, 2006 issue - It's not a stretch to call Jamie Johnson an accidental tourist in Thailand. While touring with a Christian singing group last month, Johnson, a diabetic from the United States, developed an infection in her ankle that shut down her kidneys. She was evacuated by airplane from Malaysia to Bumrungrad International hospital in Bangkok-a facility she had ever heard of in a country she had never been to and in a city she had associated with sex shows in beer bars. "My husband back home was thinking, 'She's going to be in a straw hut'," she says.

Johnson, though, was lucky enough to land in Asia's first internationally accredited hospital and one of the most modern and efficient medical facilities in the world. Last year the hospital treated 400,000 foreign patients-the highest of any hospital in the world-from more than 150 countries, for everything from heart disease to hip replacements to breast implants. The attraction: world-class medicine at developing-world prices. And patients get velvet-glove treatment redolent of a five-star hotel. "We deliver the one thing that people want in health care but don't expect to get-service," says Ruben Toral, the hospital's marketing director.

As medical costs skyrocket-Americans spent 16 percent of GDP on health care last year, according to the OECD, and Europeans aren't far behind-the idea of going abroad to get healthy is becoming more and more attractive. More than 150,000 North Americans and Europeans currently seek medical treatment overseas each year, estimates Josef Woodman, author of the forthcoming "Patients Without Borders." For invasive surgeries, preferred destinations include India, Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia. Large hospitals, such as Bumrungrad and the Apollo chain in India, actively court American, European and Middle Eastern patients. Slick Web sites tout their partnerships with nearby luxury hotels for post-op recovery. Bumrungrad arranges limousines to pick up patients at the airport, and sheiks and princes congregate in the Platinum Lounge of Apollo's Delhi hospital. Abacas International, a leading travel facilitator, reports that medical tourism to Asia could generate up to \$4.4 billion by 2012.

Businesses are taking notice. At least 40 corporations have signed on to the overseas plan that United Group Programs, a health insurer in Boca Raton, Florida, began offering six months ago. Sending an employee abroad can save 80 percent of the costs of a procedure; a \$50,000 angioplasty in the United States costs less than \$6,000 in Mohali, India, according to GlobalChoice Healthcare, a firm that arranges foreign medical

procedures.

Bumrungrad officials insist that foreigners come not just for cheap bills and luxury accommodations. The hospital's doctors, they say, have been trained at the best Western medical schools and use the most advanced medical equipment. And the service is eye-opening for patients accustomed to public clinics. Walk-in patients see a specialist in 17 minutes on average. Since 75 percent of hospital revenues are paid by patients directly, health and insurance companies have no say in treatment. Low labor costs allow Thai hospitals to employ more staff.

Some health-insurance companies are embracing medical tourism to reduce costs and make policyholders happy. It is only a matter of time before the phenomenon evolves into medical outsourcing, says Mack Banner, Bumrungrad's CEO. "People are going to leave their country, they're going to go overseas and they're going to get health care," he says. To make room for them, Bumrungrad is building an 18-story outpatient center, which will double the hospital's capacity to 6,000 outpatients per day. That's room for a lot of tourists, accidental or otherwise.

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