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Cebu medical tourism eyes Canadian market



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Written by Wilfredo Rodolfo III / Reporter

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CEBU'S spa and medical-tourism players are eyeing the lucrative Canadian market, strengthening their push to place the island province as the wellness capital of Asia.

Dr. Clarissa Jane Pe of the Philippine Dental Society, a member of the Cebu Health and Wellness Council (CHWC), said the Cebu group is set to join the Mabuhay Festival in Toronto and set to meet the Asian Canadian Business Association in Vancouver later this year.

"We are hoping to meet medical practitioners and business organizations so they can help promote Cebu as a wellness destination," Pe said.

Johnnie Lim of the Spa and Wellness Association of Cebu, also a sitting member of CHWC, said the thrust of the council is to promote Cebu as a medical-tourism destination and is throwing in Cebu's world-class spas, resorts and tourism destination as an added incentive.

"They will not come all the way to the Philippines just to get a massage. But after their medical procedures, they can enjoy what Cebu can offer," Lim told the BusinessMirror. "We want them to have a [medical] procedure and a vacation at the same time. That is our competitive advantage."

Lim said Canada is a lucrative market considering the presence of Filipinos there. He said Canada is also relatively unscathed from the global economic downturn. Cebu's major hospitals are also already internationally accredited and can accept health insurance from North America and Europe.

The medical-tourism industry is one of the biggest growing segments in tourism. Although the segment is still highly diffused, the International Spa Association pegged revenues in the United States at \$10 billion in 2001, according to a report from the Small and Medium Enterprise Development for Sustainable Development (Smedsep) program.

In Asia the medical-tourism industry was estimated to have generated \$1.5 billion in 2006, but most of the revenues are going to other countries. Thailand alone treated 1 million of its 13 million tourists in 2007, mostly in plastic and cosmetic surgery. Singapore served 400,000 medical tourists in 2006.

The Philippines estimated to have treated 100,000 foreign patients in 2007, generating \$400 million. The government projects the revenues to hit \$2 billion by 2012.

The spa-and-wellness industry in Asia is also estimated to generate \$27 billion, according to the Smedsep report.

Tourism arrivals worldwide is also expected to hit 1.5 billion in 2020, with total revenues exceeding \$1.5 trillion. The share of developing countries, including the Philippines, in the global market is around 45 percent.

Cebu gets more than 600,000 foreign tourists annually, or around 20 percent for the entire country.

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