

LATIN AMERICA: Potential for medical tourism remains untapped

A 2008 study by Deloitte identified Brazil, Costa Rica and Mexico, boasting professional costs ranging from 25 to 50 percent of the US average, as countries in Latin America with the greatest potential for inbound medical tourism. Other contenders were Argentina, Colombia, Brazil and Chile whose dental and cosmetic treatments are about 20 percent off prices in the US.

With traditional tourism hit hard by the global recession, Costa Rica is seeking to draw foreign visitors by offering reasonably priced, high-quality healthcare. A combination of proximity to the US, excellent air connections, political and social stability and low crime stats make it an attractive proposition.

Officials regularly quote the figure of 100,000 medical visitors to the country, but this may only be an estimate – 20,000 a year is a much more realistic sum.

To stimulate demand overseas, the government is enlisting the help of its tourism, health and trade ministries and planning a big publicity campaign.

The Association for the Promotion of Costa Rican Medicine (PROMED) has also been established, consisting of six health consortiums, three private hospitals and several local universities and hotels.

In Puerto Rico, medical tourism has become the hope for revenue resuscitation. Despite a dearth of healthcare facilities, tourism players talk of aiming for 120,000 visitors, but how this number will be reached is still the big question.

Medical tourism to Panama for cosmetic and other surgery is increasing as the county boasts some of the most modern medical facilities in the region.

Many Panamanian doctors have studied in the US, Canada or Europe and speak English. However, lack of unity among the stakeholders such as the hospitals, clinics, tour operators and hotels is proving to be the obstacle to what could be a better growth picture.

Brazil presents a deeply unregulated market. While local professionals do not lack for skills and do attempt to improve themselves, their community does not have a clear strategy to offer the global clientele. Few establishments can say they have international patient centres or staff trained to speak other languages and deal with the needs of foreigners.

Marketing overseas has been known to be spotty, often done by word of mouth.

Foreign patients do continue to seek treatment “south of the border”, but these have been mainly Americans and Canadians. Clientele from other parts of the world remain unconvinced that a cutprice proposition equals quality service.