Interview: Ying-Yih Wu, Minister of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Council (OCAC) of Taiwan

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The minister in charge of medical tourism in Taiwan speaks about the country's advantages over its Asian neighbours, and how the new era of Taiwan's medical services will make a difference for foreigners seeking medical treatment in the country.

ying-yih-wu-minister.jpg

Minister Wu, during our first interview with you in 2010, we posed the following question: "Medical tourism in Asia is becoming increasingly popular, but Taiwan faces a lot of competition. Dr. Jason Yap, Director of Healthcare Services at the Singapore Tourism Board, told us that people go to India because of the cost, Thailand because of the level of customer service, and Singapore because of the quality and reliability. What does Taiwan have to offer in the Asian context to separate it from neighboring countries?" What is your answer to this question today?

In Taiwan, we have a magic formula: high quality of treatment, at a very reasonable price.

I practiced medicine in Chicago for over 30 years. When I returned home, I was really able to see the advantages of the Taiwanese system. While our quality is comparable to that of the US, it is our

affordability that makes a great difference.

Among our neighbors, Singapore is most similar to Taiwan in terms of quality and reliability, but care in Singapore is quite expensive. Countries like India may offer low cost, but few of India's hospitals can offer Taiwan's quality.

Do you have some estimate of how many overseas patients come to Taiwan for treatment every year?

Over the past two years, approximately two thousand patients came from the US, and perhaps an additional two thousand came from the South East Asian region. There are also quite a few people that come to Taiwan for physical checkups or sensitive procedures like plastic surgery that don't report their visit to the state. We believe that the real figures double these numbers. We believe, moreover, that the numbers will rise exponentially in the coming years.

In 2010, one of your strategies for penetrating the US market was to convince smaller American insurers with Chinese policyholders to send their patients to Taiwan for medical care. Has this strategy panned out?

We have indeed signed one contract with a medical insurance company in the US, and we are trying to use this partnership as a model for further collaborations. We believe that we are creating a 'win-win-win' scenario: for the insurance company, sending its Chinese policyholders to Taiwan saves costs; the policy holders get the quality they are used to in the US, but delivered within a more familiar cultural context; and the Taiwanese healthcare system gets an influx of patients.

What is your final message to our readers?

We are witnessing a new era for Taiwan's medical service. We must move beyond borders. This is a country where the top university students want to go to medical school. In Taiwan, it seems that everyone wants to be a doctor! The state spends a great deal of resources training our practitioners, including subsidizing additional studies overseas. The result is a healthcare workforce that can offer some of the best service in the world. We have every opportunity to become an international medical hub.

Taiwan is also a beautiful country, with a beautiful culture. We encourage people to come experience it for themselves!

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