

AN INSIDE LOOK AT MEDICAL TOURISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Thursday, March 10, 2005

American reporter to be given unprecedented access

PENANG, MALAYSIA --- The United States has the dubious distinction of having the highest healthcare costs in the world, by some accounts twice as high as those in other comparable nations. In fact, over the last five years healthcare costs in America have risen an average of \$2,500 per family. Following in the footsteps of their European cousins, a growing number of Americans are turning to medical tourism for their surgical procedures. Every year more and more people travel to countries such as Malaysia, Thailand and India, where they can save up to 70% off their surgical procedures. Simple cosmetic surgery costing over \$8,000 in the United States can be as low as \$3,000 in other countries, for exactly the same procedures and often with better service and care.

This March, writer and journalist Eric Paul Erickson will depart on an unparalleled journey with two American women who are traveling to Malaysia for surgical procedures. Erickson has been granted unprecedented access to not only document the experiences of these two women, but the inner workings of the country's medical tourism industry. Erickson will also be keeping a blog at www.medicaltourmalaysia.com beginning March 11. Updated several times a day, the blog will give readers an even clearer picture of medical tourism in Malaysia, as well as insight into travel, customs and culture in the region including full color pictures. Blog readers will also be able to ask questions which Erickson will answer as part of his entries.

Once thought to only be the choice for those seeking lower cost cosmetic surgery, medical tourism has become the only option for a growing number of those in desperate need of life saving procedures. Recently a 73-year-old British man was told he would have to wait six months for heart bypass surgery covered by the National Health Service or pay \$36,000 for immediate surgery. He chose neither, instead traveling to India for the procedure at a savings of \$27,000.

Erickson will uncover the facts about medical tourism and health care in other countries, addressing the issues of safety, proper procedures, travel, accreditation, accommodations and culture. Through his eyes, Americans will be able to make their own decisions as to whether traveling abroad for medical procedures is for them. He will also delve into the growing business of the travel agencies arranging these trips which bring billions of tourism dollars to host countries such as Malaysia.

During his career, Erickson has worked for the Chicago Tribune's City News Service, the Roswell Daily Record and CNS News. Currently he works as a freelance writer in Chicago where his work appears regularly in the Chicago Tribune, Hollinger newspapers and other area and national newspapers and magazines.

Friday, March 11, 2005 Observations from La-La Land Airport

First of all, welcome to the first real "on-the-road" entry in my Medical Tour Malaysia blog.

As I write this I am sitting in the Tom Bradey International terminal at LAX, sleep deprived and realizing I have another 16 plus hours in the air before I reach my final destination.

Yet while the excitement of the journey as well as the business at hand are not far removed from the forefront of my mind, one thing continues to haunt me.

Before I left Chicago I spoke with a number of friends, family and acquaintances about their perception of Malaysia, Thailand and Asia. I must admit I was surprised by the answers I received. While many of the people did admit their perceptions were skewed and most likely entirely incorrect, they voiced a wide array of diverse and possibly troubling thoughts- troubling as a journalist, as an American and as a human being. Thoughts put forward included those in the

innocent range (types of food, customs) to the ignorant (culture, science, arts, technology). When I think that those perceptions of the outside world are unfortunately the norm and not the exception, I shudder.

It isn't that much of a wonder, I suppose, that I have also heard disparaging comments about healthcare in Asia. In talking about this trip, more often than not I was met with responses ranging from "Doctors in Asia- they aren't as well trained as American doctors" to a comment honestly comparing Asian hospitals to grass shacks like those that would be inhabited by Robinson Crusoe and his pal Friday.

It is even more troubling as I look around this waiting area at LAX and I hear the different languages, see the unique faces and experience, if only superficially, the diverse cultures.

But then I realize that my dread, my fear, my trepidation about the thoughts and perceptions of Americans I have spoken with is why I am going. Americans need to see that while our way of life is unique, it is by no means the only way of life on this globe.

Saturday, March 12, 2005 The joy of international travel

Small suggestion for airlines flying to Thailand... it isn't smart to run a film such as Bridget Jones' Diary 2 on a flight to Bangkok. For those who haven't seen it (and I won't go into my personal review of the flick, more than to say I certainly enjoyed it the first time I saw it when it was called Bridget Jones' Diary I and was slightly disappointed by Richard Curtis gang of usually talented crew this time around) our heroine ends up in a Bangkok jail after accidentally having illegal contraband in her luggage.

Even for the law abiding, as you are descending into Bangkok, you don't really need to see Renee Z. singing "Like a Virgin" with a jail cell full of prostitutes. But just an observation, not a judgment.

But then you have to wonder if they used to show "Midnight Express" on flights to Turkey. Or any film starring Pauly Shore.

Next leg: Bangkok to Penang. And hopefully some sleep.

Sunday, March 13, 2005 I can see clearly now the rain has gone...

Figuratively and literally the storm broke last night. We finally made it to our hotel in Penang. Mere minutes after we checked in the skies opened up and unleashed an enormous thunder storm that shook the hotel. Falling asleep to Malaysian television (and unfortunate reports of Arsenal's winning ways in the Premiere League... ah, Liverpool, what happened? You were doing so well...) my wife and I could hear the rain pounding the roof. After countless hours and days in transit, we fell into a deep sleep.

Waking up this morning I looked out from our balcony to see the fisherman pulling their nets from the ocean into their brightly colored boats just as they have done for hundreds of years if not more. The sky was clear and the sea calm, not a trace of the thunderstorm from the previous evening.

Looking back on the journey here, I definitely learned a few things. First of all, and advice for not only those considering medical tourism, but those travelling internationally in general. DELAYS HAPPEN. Fact of life. They just do. My schedule was planned out in such a way that numerous stops in different countries needed to happen, plus by doing so I was able to travel with four extra inches of leg room. In your own travels you should balance out the need for leg room with the gamble of missing your connecting flights. In my case I gambled and lost three times. No blackjack for me.

I will write more later on air travel (including an interesting airline called EVA AIR and also Asia's version of Southwest Airlines) but if you are looking into med tourism, it would definitely be better to have someone do the initial legwork for you. Plan the trip, take care of the incidentals and do forth. Take a trip over to www.medretreat.com to see what I mean.

Monday, March 14, 2005 Dinner with K & K

I just returned from dinner with our medical tourists Kathy and Kimberlee and while I thought they would be nervous about their upcoming procedures (Kathy is having her cosmetic procedure Tuesday while Kimberlee is having her hysterectomy and liposuction on Wednesday) I found that the complete opposite is true. As Kathy explained, by her age you've done everything so what is there to be nervous about?

However, their lack of nerves could also be due to the security they feel in the hospital and in their doctor, an American trained surgeon who resided in the states for a number of years. In the lobby of the Eastern and Oriental Hotel (an amazing structure that harkens back to the world of Colonial Victorian Britain) they chatted away like teenagers on their

way out on the town, not women who were going to have surgery over the next two days. In the United States I could imagine the average person in the same position fretting with questions and concerns, while these two women were completely at ease.

They did have some travel problems akin to mine, but theirs actually occurred in the United States when there was a refueling snafu at the Detroit airport. Their Northwest Airlines plane was delayed after a fueling spill (apparently, according to K & K, the tank was overfilled and spilled out causing a dangerous situation. The problem was increased when crews couldn't decide what job dealing with the clean-up fell under whose jurisdiction & union contract, causing further delays) caused some problems on the tarmac. They were forced to wait while clean-up crews dealt with the situation. As remuneration they were given a bottle of water and a five-minute international phone card. Without going into further details I will just say they made it clear they don't plan on travelling with that airline again anytime soon.

Yet even with that problem and a long delay due to a repair issue on the Kuala Lumpur to Penang train, they told me they have been having a wonderful time, including shopping to their heart's content. They joked that they are trying to find ways to ship back cargo crates of what they purchased, but I'm thinking that there was more than a kernel of truth to that thought.

In addition to Kathy's procedure, Tuesday brings an inside look at the hospital, where I will be able to see first hand the facilities and speak with medical staff and the owner of Beautiful Holidays (www.beautifulholidays.com) , the company that worked in tandem with Medretreat to schedule their procedures. I'm very interested to not only see the facility, but how they handle American patients, because of the cultural differences. In addition, I'm wondering how Kathy and Kimberlee will react to the Malaysian medical culture.

Tuesday, March 15, 2005 Kathy's surgery, hospital tour & personal thoughts

After meeting Kathy and Kimberlee at the hospital this morning, we headed in for the ladies' consultation with Dr. Danny as he is affectionately known. Dr. Danny spent nearly 30 years as a cosmetic surgeon in Dayton, Ohio before returning to Penang and working at Adventist Hospital. Walking into the lobby of the cosmetic wing, I have to say I was impressed by the facility. There really was nothing that wouldn't make one think that the office wasn't in the middle of Beverly Hills or Connecticut. Surrounded by carefully manicured foliage and shrubbery, the brightly lit office was inviting and reassuring.



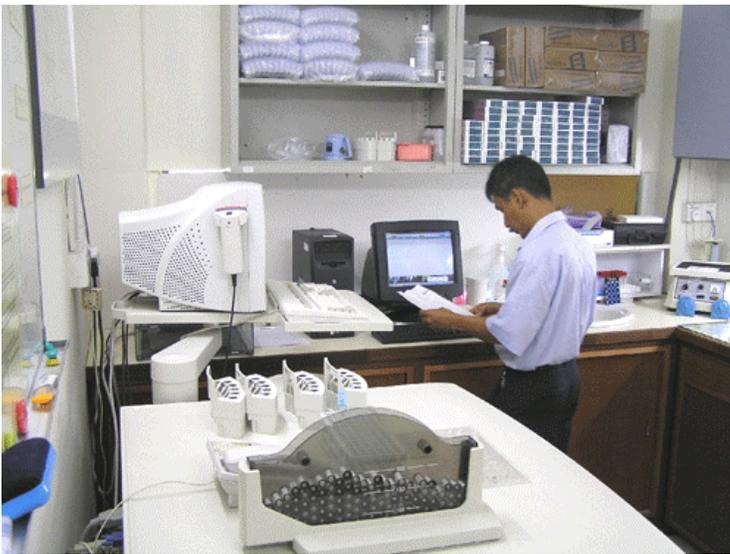
The reassurance didn't stop at the door as we sat down for the consultation. Dr. Danny spent the better part of an hour explaining Kathy's procedure, touching on every part, including specifics on how the surgery would be conducted and showing her a computer slide show of the past work he had done. I watched Kathy as she listened intently and never once did I see concern, trepidation or fear on her face.



Later, after the consultation, Kathy explained to me that she was very impressed with the special treatment she received, a sentiment echoed by Kimberlee. It was the fact that the doctor didn't try to rush her through the information nor did he push any other unneeded surgery on her. The comments were echoed by Kimberlee, who explained that in the medical profession as a nurse, she has all too often in her career seen doctors who try to set land speed records in seeing patients. The assembly line mentality, she explained.



Following the consultation, Kimberlee and I were taken on a tour of the hospital. If you think that Adventist is some type of small local chop shop or back water facility, you couldn't be further from the truth. The hospital has 276 beds with a staff of 900, including nearly 70 physicians and 300 nurses. Kimberlee explained to me that it is comparable in size to the hospital she works at in North Carolina. However when she was told the nurse to patient ICU ratio, she was shocked. Adventist works to keep a ratio of 1 to 1. You read correctly. If you think it is because there aren't any patients, it's not true. According to hospital staff, Adventist sees 100,000 patients per year. However, in contrast to many American hospitals, they do not see violent crimes which is chalked up to the fact that guns are illegal in Malaysia. In fact, being found with a gun carries the death penalty here. So you can see why nurses don't see gunshot wounds in the ER like American hospitals.



Of those 100,000 patients, about 30 percent are foreign, not only medical tourists, but those who come from surrounding countries to partake in Adventist's advanced and affordable healthcare. Adventist is one of only a handful of hospitals in the world that is used as a testing center for GE medical products such as MRI, CT Scan and radiology equipment. Before your neighborhood hospital gets the latest equipment, it's been in use for a while at Adventist

During the tour we were brought into the ICU unit where I saw a young boy who couldn't have been more than four years old. He had been brought in with a degenerative heart defect. Lying on the bed, he had recently been brought from surgery and was still unconscious, but beginning to stir. Seeing the bandage that ran the length of his tiny chest, I found myself choked up. While it is a wonderful thing that he was able to receive treatment at Adventist (the hospital has one of the best pediatric cardiac units in Asia), I have to admit my heart went out for this boy who probably had no concept of why he was in this bed or why he was in pain from a procedure there was no way his young mind could understand.

He seemed so fragile in that bed, two nurses watching him closely. At one point he stirred slightly, knocking a pillow away and dislodging his blanket. It was mere seconds before the nurse had him resettled.

Watching him, I thought of his mother, knowing that she must care for this boy more than life itself and if anything happened to the youth, she would never forgive herself. Would she put her son in a position where he might not survive? Would she place this young boy in a place where he could be harmed? Would she bring him to a hospital that wasn't the best she could find?

I would never believe that a mother would risk her child's life by bringing him to a hospital she didn't trust. Any mother worth anything would only put her child's life in the hands of a doctor she believed could heal her son. Having health problems of my own as a child, I know my own mother would have gladly put herself in my place if it would end my pain.

Observing that boy sleep, his two nursing angels watching closely as he lay in the bed, the white chest bandage moving ever so slightly as he breathed, how can anyone tell me that this hospital isn't on par with any other hospital in the world?

Pictures

- The woman below at the kiosk is Kimberlee, the nurse having the procedure. The kiosk is the new check in procedure.

Never seen anything like it in the states, have you?



- This scenic shot is the view from the hospital room.



Flying for medical tourism

One of the comments I received asked why upscale hotels aren't involved in the airline process so people don't have the problems I did. The reason is actually very simple: they just don't do it. It's not their job. They are here to provide a service and that service is accommodations. Businesses such as Beautiful Holidays and Medretreat set up the hotel and the procedure, but airfare is up to the individual.

The reason for this was explained to me by Marloes of BH. Personal likes, dislikes and tastes are very difficult to predict. Someone from one country might be fine with economy class while someone else might want a certain airline. If a company tried to accommodate all these needs, they would lose the personal touch that they have created. The company picks up travelers at the airport and literally holds their hand through the entire process. By leaving travel arrangements up to the individual that person can plan exactly what they want, how they want it and when they want.

My travel situation was unique. I was looking for a specific route to meet my needs as a journalist and therefore ran into complications. Usually those people traveling for these procedures have direct flights. I chose otherwise so I could make some stops on the way.

As for comfort after the procedure, this isn't a situation where you have the surgery and are put on the plane

within 24 hours. Patients will stay a few weeks, usually having the surgery during the first few days and then recuperate for 7-12 days. The idea is that no one is ever put on a plane fresh out of the operating room. That is why it is called medical tourism- it's a tour, a vacation of sorts.

Another comment asked if I thought American patients are treated differently than any other patient. I don't think they are. The only thing that might be different, and I was told this by hospital staff that Americans are not familiar with Asian culture and might not understand the way things work here. They receive a high standard of service, just as someone from the United Kingdom, Brazil or Malaysia would receive.



Eric and Kimberlee discussing her procedure

Wednesday, March 16, 2005 If this is Wednesday it must be Penang

Another busy day in Malaysia.

Kimberlee had her liposuction today. I saw her off to surgery and then went on to see Kathy, who was recuperating in the main hospital. While in the United States she would have normally been discharged a few hours after her procedure, because the private room rate is less than \$100 a day, she was able to rest comfortably under doctor's supervision until Friday. She was in good spirits, but a little sore and swollen, which is to be expected. She was craving a vanilla milkshake, but we couldn't find one because the McDonald's didn't open until 11 a.m. (things run differently here. Many businesses don't open until later and then don't close until nearly midnight. Partially because the warm weather, partially because of the laid back lifestyle.)

The staff said she was doing wonderfully. A funny side note, she was wearing a green ice mask to help with the swelling and it made her look like Jim Carrey in *The Mask*. She found it funny as well, but tried not to laugh because it wasn't comfortable.

While she was here, Kathy decided to have an MRI done at a fraction of the cost that it would be in the United States. She had an injury to her leg once upon a time and it had been giving her some trouble, so she decided to have a look at it. If you look below you'll see the machine- state of the art.

I found out that the hospital offers Lasik surgery and inquired about the cost. It would be \$1,500 USD for both eyes, while in Chicago I had priced the procedure at \$3,000- \$4,000. They tried to fit me in, but the procedure is so popular that there weren't any openings until after my departure. Too bad, but a definite reason for a return.

After leaving the hospital, my wife and I were taken on a tour of Penang, which included a trip to an enormous Buddhist temple on the hill overlooking Georgetown. It was like a step back into time to walk around the structure and up to a pagoda that towers over the city. I hope to have photos posted tomorrow. The temple is building a new roof and Shari (my wife) and I bought a tile that will be used in the construction for 20 RM (about five dollars). Our names were printed on the tile and I have to be honest, it looked a bit strange next to all the Chinese characters. You have to wonder what people will think in 50 years when they rebuild it again and see the names of two westerners.

I asked why those who weren't Buddhist still bowed in front of the statues like a practitioner would (even Muslims, Christians & non-denomination). The answer I received put me in my palace. I was told they do it out of respect. Even if it

isn't their religion, they still respect the religion of their neighbor's and pay homage to their beliefs. Americans could probably learn a thing or two from that. I know I certainly did.

A film crew was following us around the temple documenting our trip and locals kept stopping them to ask who we were and why we were important enough to film. The cameraman finally decided to have a bit of fun and began to tell them we were "superstars" from the United States. You should have seen the people stare and try to figure out who we were... or should I say, who we weren't.

After a lunch of curry beef and chicken, our guide Tony asked if we wanted to try reflexology, a common medical treatment in Asia for everything that ails you. Never one to turn down a good foot rub, I was all for it. For an hour we got our feet rubbed as well as our hands for 35 rm (about \$9 USD). Tony explained that many of the medical tourists that come for procedures make numerous visits to reflexology practitioners. Also available were back, neck and shoulder massages for about the same price.

Someone wrote and asked if Adventist is related to the Adventist chain in the United States. No, they aren't. The full name is Penang Adventist Hospital (<http://www.pah.com.my/>) and they are an 80-year-old not-for-profit hospital here begun by Seventh Day Adventist Dr. Earl Gardner with the belief "Poor treated free." There isn't any affiliation with the Adventist hospitals in the states.

I was also asked about errors made by Asian hospitals. I will be meeting with staff tomorrow and will specifically ask them that question and get back to you. I do want to mention that hospitals here are accredited, not only by Malaysian Society in Health and Quality and Adventist Health Services Asia, but their JCAHO accreditation (www.jcaho.org) is pending (the paperwork is processing, they are well over the standards.)



Thursday, March 17, 2005 Winding down

Just a quick entry before I head off to have lunch with Kimberlee and Kathy. The posting about taxes was a very good point. No, American insurance will not cover procedures here. A lot of times it's difficult to cover a procedure in another state, let alone another country. But often the actual cost of the procedure in Malaysia is just a bit higher than the deductible you would pay in the States. That's why Kathy choose to have her MRI done here.

We are leaving Penang tomorrow and are on to Bangkok. I will be uploading a large number of photos later today, including hospital rooms, hotels, and of course our friend Ashley. This morning we visited a local Thai Buddhist temple and Ashley was in awe of the beautiful artwork, colors and statues. She even sat with my wife and I as we discussed Buddhism with a very nice monk named Phra. Next time you hear someone complain about working their way up the corporate ladder or through tough classes in school, remember this: Phra told us he has been a monk for ten years and he is still called a "novice." He explained with a smile that he has a long way to go.

Oh, and for those football fans out there, I had the most surreal experience. Last night as I was winding down I watched the Liverpool- Blackburn match. (Liverpool just couldn't pull it off, tying 0-0). It was great to wake up and have the write-up of the match in the morning New Straits Times. In the States the game is rebroadcast on Saturday, so I would already know the result. Soccer/football is everywhere here. Every time my wife turns around I'm trying to buy a jersey or other

Liverpool memorabilia. Got a great bandana with the team crest for a dollar. I know the only way I could get it in the States would be Ebay at a cost of probably ten bucks, plus shipping.

Medical Tourism in Detail

From the emails I've been receiving, I think it might be time to explain a bit more about the specifics of medical tourism.

Let's say you wanted to have lasik surgery. You would contact one of the companies I mentioned earlier: medretreat.com in the US or beautifulholidays.com in Europe. They would arrange the trip for you in this way:

First they would discuss the procedure and what exactly you were looking for. Then you would be able to decide which country in which you wanted to have the surgery. For the sake of argument, let's say it was in Malaysia. Then they would ask what type of hotel you wanted. In Penang, for example, you can choose from four hotels that they work with: The Eastern & Oriental (E&O) or the Park Ridge (both high end four stars), or the Lone Pine or Paradise (high end three- to four-star).

The type of hotel you choose is really based upon your own personal desire. The E&O is a colonial throwback with butler service and incredible ambience, while the Lone Pine is a bit quieter and low maintenance. All four hotels are very nice you would be pleasantly comfortable and happy with any of them. Beautiful Holidays has personal relationships with each of these hotels.

As I mentioned earlier, planning the air travel is left to the customer. And soon you will see why this is important.

Once you arrive, you are greeted at the airport (in Malaysia) by a member of the Beautiful Holidays' staff. They will bring you to your hotel where you will be checked in and allowed to rest from your journey. Usually you will have a consultation with your doctor within a day or so and the staff member will transport you to the hospital and even sit with you to answer any questions. The procedure is usually conducted the day after that.

Understand that you are never alone. A staff member is always with you or just a phone call away. Even if you are at your hotel, the staff there knows you by name and that you are a Beautiful Holidays client and treats you with special care.

The misconception is that you will be put back on a plane soon after. This is far from the truth. In the example of Kathy, she had her face lift on Tuesday and was able to stay in the hospital until her discharge Thursday afternoon. For the price of one night in a double occupancy American hospital room, she can stay three or four nights in a private room at Adventist.

When check out arrives, a staff member will pick you up from the hospital and transport you back to your hotel where you will recuperate for the next 7 TO 14 DAYS depending on your schedule. During that time you can lay in the sun, enjoy the hotel facilities, sightsee, shop or just lay in your suite and order room service. All these activities can be arranged through the Beautiful Holidays including transportation. They can even provide a guide for no extra cost. Once your time in Malaysia is over, Beautiful Holidays will take you to the airport, drop you at your flight and see you off.

Another concern was the language barrier. I can only speak for Malaysia, but this definitely isn't a problem. The doctors are American trained and the nurses speak English very well. As you make your way around town, you will see that English is very common, with signs in Malay, Chinese and English. In fact the government promotes the learning of English by providing bi-lingual language studies in the schools.

As for the question about liability, the hospital explained that if anything does go wrong, they keep the lines of communication open. If it is a routine problem (such as an infection, which does happen, even in the United States, usually from a failure of the individual to follow procedure) they will advise the patient. I was told that if a major problem does occur and the physician was at fault (hospital staff said that this has never happened to a medical tourist) they would absolutely take care of them in the States. All they ask is that the lines of communication, via phone or email, are kept open so they know what is going on. Dr. Danny regularly emails his patients to inquire on their recovery after they return home.

Dr. Danny also said that as a matter of practice he will see any patient free of charge for a year and take care of any problems. This is something he has done since he began practicing in 1983 including his time in the United States. He only asks that patients pay for material, because in the past people have taken advantage of his policy by telling him to remove more fat or redo a face lift because a 60 year-old only looks 30 instead of the 18 she wanted, something we all know is an impossibility.

Friday, March 18, 2005 No loss in translation



We are in Bangkok, safe and sound and, again, very tired. This time it isn't the fault of the airline. The blame rests completely on our shoulders and those of our new friends: Tony (who works for Beautiful Holidays) and Sonya.

After a busy week of touring hotels, the hospital, visiting with doctors and meeting so many nice people on the island, Tony and his fiancée (send gifts, they are getting married June 6th of next year) took us out to dinner and then suggested karaoke. Accustomed to karaoke in the United States, we were a little hesitant, until they explained that it is different here. You get a room with your own waiter and a private karaoke machine, just like the scene in "Lost in Translation." After a few Tiger beers (and then a few more) we were singing our way through the night, butchering everything from Bryan Adams to Don McLean. It was T & S that amazed us with their singing, especially Sonya's version of the theme song from "Turn Left, Turn Right," one of my favorite Asian films (she admitted she has a small crush on Takeshi Kaneshiro, the film's star, but then my wife admitted she does as well). If anyone is looking for the next undiscovered pop-superstar, look no further than this wonderful airline stewardess. Tony is a very lucky man.

I ran into Kathy and Kimberlee having breakfast on my way to catch a taxi to the airport. Kathy's face lift went wonderfully. Dr. Danny checked her out and said she was coming along great. Kimberlee is still a little sore from the lipo, which is normal, but he also said she was doing well. They are going sailing next week (once they have recovered a bit more) and plan to do some more shopping. These two women could win Olympic medals in power shopping.

I will continue to update this blog while in Thailand for the next three days, adding more photos and background. If you have any questions, please send them along. Now that things have slowed down a bit, I can answer them in earnest.

Saturday, March 19, 2005 More Hospital Photos

More hospital photos:

This is the head of the MRI department that is standing:



A typical lab:



A small nursing office:



Now that I am back in the States and have had a few hours sleep and a bit of time to shake jet lag, I've been able to reflect on what I've seen over the last couple of weeks.

The People:

I was amazed by the friendliness of the people of Malaysia and Penang. Everywhere I went I was met by smiles and happy greetings. At no time did I feel anything but good will from the residents of that country, whether they be Malaysian or Chinese, Buddhist or Muslim, young or old. While there were questions about the decisions my government had made around the world, it was always prefaced or followed by an explanation that the person really liked Americans and what they stood for, it was our government's foreign policy by which they were troubled.

As my wife and I wandered through shops in the city, we were greeted by smiles and eased conversations, usually in perfect English with a slight accent. We had many wonderful talks with the residents of this island on topics ranging from local cuisine and religion to world policy to what snow feels like (living in Chicago, always complaining about the winters, we tend to forget that some people have never touched, let alone seen real snow!)

Penang forced me to slow down a bit, with its unique "island time" pace. While traffic can be a bit crazy (red lights can mean stop if you want to, and they give a whole new meaning to "white-lining" for you motorcyclists) the standard of living is amazing. The people are calm and happy, not to mention full of respect and peace. You've got to admire a people who make foot massage a weekly event in their lives!

The Hospital:

In my personal and professional life I have visited more hospitals than I care to remember. Some of them have been world class research and teaching centers that produce some of the world's greatest doctors, while others have been dirty, under funded facilities in our inner cities where gunshot victims fill the emergency room. Adventist Hospital would easily vault past numerous American medical centers because of a combination of staff to patient ratio, equipment, attention to detail and overall attitude. Never did I see patients waiting in hallways on gurneys (a common sight in the United States) or calling out for attention. Nurses were always at hand. The building was amazingly clean, even when poking my head around corners to see places that weren't on my tour.

As a journalist, I can only present the facts, as I have in this blog and will continue to do so in the articles I will write about my trip. As a writer and "social and cultural explorer," I have more leeway. The hospital felt inviting, or as inviting as a hospital can. No one likes to be sick and no one likes to have surgery. But Adventist presented an environment that seemed to put patients at ease: they were going to have a procedure, but they were going to be safe and comfortable during the time they must spend there.

The Business of Medical Tourism:

After spending a week with Marloes, Wim, Tony and the staff of Beautiful Holidays, I can report that they have a system down and it works. Their "hand-holding" technique makes the experience simple, safe and pleasant. Kathy and Kimberlee were able to not only have their procedures with ease, but were able to enjoy a vacation while they were there. At no time were they alone. If a BH staff member wasn't with them, they were only minutes away. Even at night, the staff of the hotel was watching out for the two women, talking to them by name and keeping their safety a top priority.

One note here, Medical Tourism isn't for everyone. The plane trip of 16 hours will be a bit tough for some people, and others will just not feel comfortable in a foreign country, no matter how at ease BH, the hospital and the people of Penang try to put people. Others will not feel ready to have the procedures no matter how many questions they ask. However at this point, one would have to ask themselves, is it the location they are having a problem with or is it really the procedure of which they are afraid?

Do your research. In the following months you will see many articles touting the wonderful aspects of Medical Tourism and others maligning it. Read the articles closely- Are they being written by people who have seen the procedures? The hospitals? Met the patients?

Or are they being created by organizations trying to keep people in the States and funded by medical organizations afraid of losing the dollars brought in by sky high American medical costs?

Find out yourself? Remember: It isn't that the American way of doing things is the right or wrong way, just realize it isn't the only way.

Eric