

## Surgery in Korea, anyone? Medical tourism emerges

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Website for medical tourism in Korea - [www.koreahealthtour.co.kr](http://www.koreahealthtour.co.kr)

"Which hospital does the best plastic surgery in Korea?" Back in the summer of 2006, when this question popped into our webmaster e-mail box at **www.korea.net** it seemed like a joke, like the e-mails that demanded the phone number of North Korea's Kim Jong-il. "Sorry," we replied at the time. "This is a government website and we do not handpick private medical institutions." (Imagine the government having to compensate in case of any mishaps!)



But things do change with time. Anyone interested in dental care, plastic surgery or oriental medicine in Korea?

Visit the homepage of the Council for Korea Medicine Overseas Promotion (**[www.koreahealthtour.co.kr](http://www.koreahealthtour.co.kr)**) – an English website that introduces some of the best medical centers in Korea that come with tour packages, headed by the Council for Korea Medicine Overseas Promotion (CKMP).

The website provides a basic explanation of Korea as a country and where it excels in medical technology. One can use the search engine to check out the websites of respective hospitals by profession, by name or other useful keywords. There's also an extra button to show tourist spots near particular hospital, be it a famous shopping district or grand palaces. One can also reverse search hospitals by nearby tourist attraction.

The Council, inaugurated by the Korea Tourism Organization, Korea Health Industry Development Institute and Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare in March 2007 is the strategic organization out to promote Korea's prowess in medicine. Some 30 major hospitals are members of the Council and more are expected to join later on.

### Medical tourism in its infancy

Overseas Koreans have long made a habit of returning home temporarily for dental and other medical checkups due to the reasonable prices of Korean hospitals, whose technology is 90 per cent that of advanced nations and just one third of the cost of America and other western nations



western nations.

Tourists from China, Japan and Southeast Asian nations are flocking in for plastic surgery lured by good-looking actors and actresses on Korean TV dramas and movies. Patients from the West much prefer treatment for cancer or implants.

Up till now it was the fear of sharp competition and complications of visa problems that long prevented Korea from tapping into this particular potential. Not anymore. These days many hospitals in Korea, with or without government help, have been making efforts to promote their services in neighboring countries. A medical visa is now being discussed for overseas visitors coming for this particular tour package. Experts agree that the faster the reform the better.

With the competitive prices that the Korean medical industry offers, it could soon join the benefits enjoyed by other medical tourism industries in India Singapore, Thailand and others. The Health and Welfare Ministry is reviewing the establishment of an international medical service academy, dispatching experts overseas and other diversified networks around the world.

Now Korea is actively moving forward, trying to make up for lost time. Last year alone, the Council attended various seminars, experience fairs and exhibitions to promote Korea in this area.



Korea won the right to host 3rd International Medical Travel Conference for this November after much promotion overseas.

The Korea Tourism Organization has been selling 12 types of medical tourism package in six branch offices in New York, Tokyo, Sendai, Dubai, Chicago and Hong Kong since last year through various events. Thanks to these efforts the Council is in strategic partnership

with the U.S. Medical Tourism Association among other things.

Overall, CKMP member hospitals attracted a total of 16,000 patients from abroad in the past year. That's quite an improvement from some 760 back in 2005. The Council aims to hit 100,000 by 2012.

Another big piece of news is that the Korea Tourism Organization, together with the Culture Ministry, has successfully won the rights to host the third International Medical Travel Conference (IMTC) this coming November 11-14, giving another chance for Korea to aggressively promote its medical market.

Lee has long realized the importance of the overseas market, and worked to provide the best of service to the visitors, from reservation to treatment, equipping the hospital with simultaneous interpreters. He would even treat in hotels and inns

in case it was hard for the tourists to make repeated visits. The efforts paid off as rumors spread and some 1,000 patients from overseas visited the place last year alone, probably the highest single number of medical tourists in the nation.

"Korea already has highly advanced technology in cardiac, spinal and other surgeries. I believe that's what adds up to create a new image of the country. We will have more exchanges with doctors overseas and upgrade the country's image as a whole," he said.

Jaseng Hospital of Oriental Medicine established an international clinic in 2006 complete with simultaneous interpreters. The hospital also made full use of Raimund Royer, the first non-Korean oriental medicine doctor in Korea, fluent in both English and German. As a result it attracted some 400 non-native patients, 29 percent Japanese, 24 Americans and 13 percent German. The hospital provides prescriptions translated into English and special medicine delivery services.

Woorideul Spine Hospital, which established an International Patients Center in 2005, has also seen its number of patients rise every year. What used to be around 200 now amounts to over 700 per year. With a homepage in English, Chinese and Japanese it is also increasing the number of beds and covers other services regarding e-mails, phone calls, visa issuance, interpreting, insurance and more. Woorideul further plans to remodel one of its buildings near Gimpo Airport to turn it into an international hospital.

### **Tourists in search of beauty and comfort**

Anacli Center for plastic surgery and dermatology

"From the perspective of the patients, it's important to provide good treatment, regardless of where they come from," Lee Sang-jun, the leading doctor at Anacli Center specializing in plastic surgery and dermatology said.



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#### Oriental Medicine

Not to be outdone, local regions are also gearing up. The city of Daegu, for one, invited 11 journalists from Algeria, 20 buyers from the Philippines, on Feb. 21 and 28, respectively, to experience superior medical treatment together with a folk village and amusement park, to sample medical tourism outside the capital city as well.

"Hospitals vary in their preparation," James Bae, at Korea Health Industry Development Institute admitted, pointing to the lack of general infrastructure." Some are only prepared for services in English, some only in Chinese and Japanese, some haven't decided on what exact route to promote themselves. But the most important thing we decided as we selected our members, is their strong will to work on it from now on. We know it will happen."

By Kim Hee-sung  
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Source: [www.korea.net](http://www.korea.net)