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politics

by lionel martin

havana, jul 19, reuter -- the cuban government is inviting foreigners to enjoy the proverbial sun, sand and sea and, at the same time, receive the best medical care available on the island for everything from skin grafts and eye operations to radiation treatments, plastic surgery and abortions.

+come to cuba and improve your health while enjoying our benign climate and pure environment,+ an enticing brochure, distributed by the cuban tourist bureau +cubatur+, declares.

while medical care is free for cuban citizens, the medical plan for foreigners is an unabashedly commercial venture.

according to the brochure, +the cira garcia central clinic will coordinate medical attention for foreigners through a network that is considered among the most advanced in latin america.+

the consensus among foreign diplomats who have received treatment at the +cira garcia+ clinic, or other cuban hospitals contend that the best of cuba's medical care is excellent by international standards.

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during a visit to cuba last august, dr halfdan mahler, the director-general of the world health organisation, praised cuba's medical services and the progress it has made in public health.

arrangements for the medical junket to cuba are made through cubatur or by writing directly to the +cira garcia+ hospital in havana.

the arriving patient can check into a hotel in havana or choose to stay at the beach resorts of santa maria del mar nearby or varadero, some 90 miles away. rates in a first class hotel are 76 dollars a day for a single room and 57 dollars per person for a double room.

the brochure publishes a list of package plan prices for operations.

an abortion for a patient with no more than eight weeks of pregnancy, including 12 hours in the hospital, costs 283 dollars.

+nose job+ plastic surgery costs 778 dollars. an operation for cataracts, 653 dollars. a complete hysterectomy, including seven days in the hospital costs 983 dollars, and arterial grafts, with 20 days of hospitalisation, are listed at 3 363 dollars.

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you can have all your teeth pulled for only 25 dollars, and have false teeth put in for 150 dollars.

extra days in the hospital, including food, telephone, t.v., doctor's visit and floor nurse, will cost 60 dollars daily, according to the brochure.

a consultation with a university medical school professor is listed at 40 dollars and ambulance service within havana at ten dollars a trip.

cuban president fidel castro last december nine said that medical services at both home and abroad could become +an important sphere of the cuban economy.+

cuba has about a thousand physicians working in nicaragua, ethiopia, kampuchea, angola, mozambique, viet nam and south yemen. recently, a cuban-directed medical school in south yemen graduated its first physicians.

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renowned cuban specialists, such as the orthopedic surgeon dr rodrigo alvarez cambra, have been called to many medical consultations overseas. among dr alvarez cambra's patients was the president of iraq.

in his december speech, cuban president fidel castro spoke about turning cuba into an international medical centre.

since the revolution, dozens of hospitals and hundreds of clinics have been built throughout the island.

cuban medical schools turn out over one thousand doctors a year. the number of physicians has risen from 3 000 in 1961 to more than 17 000 today.

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the announced purpose of cuba's medical plan for foreigners is to gain hard currency for a cuban economy that has been hit hard by the dramatic drop in crude sugar prices on the world market. a cuban medical source said: +we have no idea how much money will be earned through medical treatment for foreigners, but every little bit helps.+

cuban officials do not expect a massive influx of prospective foreign patients as a result of their low-key advertising campaign. one official said that only a tiny fraction of the expected 180,000 tourist this year will come to cuba for medical treatment.

o there are no statistics available on the number of foreigners who come to cuba each year for medical attention, according to the source, the number runs into the thousands if one includes foreign students studying in cuba.

a tourist industry source said that the biggest, prospective markets for cuban medical services are canada, mexico and spain which send the largest number of tourists to cuba.

the united states is not a likely market at present, according to the source because of recent u.s. treasury restriction on dollar expenditures by u.s. citizens in cuba. in 1981, according to u.s. government statistics, 38,000 tourists from the united states visited cuba, half of them cuban-born exiles from miami and other cities.

one western diplomat speculated here that the cuban medical plan might be attractive to patients who value discretion or to women in such places as latin america where abortions are prohibited by law.