

Interview with Ying-Yih Wu, Minister, Overseas Compatriot Affairs Commission

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Minister Wu, please tell our readers a little about your background, and how you came to be in charge of the Overseas Compatriot Affairs Commission (OCAC).

I graduated from National Taiwan University and did two years service in the Veterans General Hospital as a surgeon. I moved to the United States in 1972 to finish my surgical training program, and practiced general surgery in the Chicago area from 1980 until 2005. At this point I moved back to Taiwan to serve as a senator in Taiwan's Legislative Yuan for three years, and for these three years I was on the Committee of the Department of Health and the Environment in the Executive Yuan. In 2008, the KMT came back into power and I was appointed as Minister of the Overseas Compatriot Affairs Commission.

One of my key roles today as the Minister in charge of the OCAC is to promote Taiwan as a medical centre of excellence around the world. As a former US surgeon and having spent 5 years in the Taiwanese government, I see that Taiwan has excellent potential to develop itself as a centre for medical tourism. In the US, there are many medical treatments that ordinary people simply cannot afford. Plastic surgery is a prime example of this: In the US, plastic surgery is very infrequently covered under people's medical insurance, and the costs for operations are very high. In Taiwan, the level of plastic surgery is so high that the same results can be achieved as in the US, but for a much lower price. There are also some medical fields and cases in the US that doctors are unwilling or unable to treat: many of those patients will find that in Taiwan, these procedures can be done.

The work that the OCAC does in terms of promoting Taiwan's healthcare sector is quite rare. Why is it this necessary, and why is OCAC involved in these activities?

I saw during my work in the United States and on my return to Taiwan that there is a big gap in the US healthcare system that can easily be filled by Taiwan. There are two ways that Taiwan can capitalize on this situation. The first is through the private pay sector: operations such as plastic surgery, or operations that are no longer covered by US health insurance such as hip replacements for the elderly. There are so many patients in the United States of Chinese origin with poor health insurance coverage, that cannot afford to pay the high rates asked in the US for operations such as hip replacements. Many people in this situation already come back to Taiwan, where they can get excellent results and a much lower cost, and at the same time feel very comfortable due to the lack of a language barrier. As the head of the OCAC, I feel it is my responsibility to educate more people around the world about these strengths of Taiwanese medical services.

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 was saying that people go to India because of the cost, Thailand because of the level of customer service and Singapore because of their quality and reliability. What does Taiwan have to offer in the Asian context to separate it from its neighbouring countries?

Compared to Singapore, the cost of medical care in Taiwan is very low: between 30-50% cheaper. Compared to the United States, Taiwan is 50-70% cheaper. Our costs are very good incentives. I was recently in Malaysia, a country very good at attracting Chinese people to its medical services. However, it makes much more sense for these customers to come to Taiwan. It can take two or three hours to get to Malaysia from Mainland China: Taiwan is not only closer, but it is cheaper and far more advanced in medical care.

As well as focusing on the Chinese population of the United States, I decided that OCAC would also focus on bringing Chinese speakers from Southern Asia to Taiwan for medical treatment. In these countries there are around 30 million Chinese-speaking people: this is a large potential market. These people are familiar with Taiwan, and because of the language our island should be much more attractive than Singapore, Malaysia or Thailand.

In order to bring these people to Taiwan, OCAC sent out two promotional teams, one to the United States and the other to Indonesia and Malaysia to advocate the strengths of Taiwanese medical care. During these trips, OCAC stirred a lot of interest in Taiwan's medical services.

How else are you looking to bring business to Taiwan's booming healthcare sector from abroad?

One of OCAC's most important missions is to attract medical insurance companies to send their patients to Taiwan. This complements the drive to bring in private patients. However, bringing the biggest of the United States' largest insurance companies is not the first step. Rather, we have selected some smaller insurance companies in the south and east of the US, whose margins are very low and who currently struggle to provide high levels of service to their policy holders. In many cases these policy holders are almost exclusively of Chinese ethnicity, often second-generation immigrants from Taiwan and mainland China. The current plan is to initially approach one insurance company and convince them to send their patients here. I want to prove that this can be a very profitable business model for smaller Chinese-focused insurers in the US, and eventually show that it can be profitable for even the larger insurance companies. Insurance companies have to pay so much money in the US, but could spend very little here and get good results and better service. Many Chinese speakers in the US cannot communicate well with their doctors, but here they can communicate perfectly. Even the food is better in Taiwanese hospitals!

Are you optimistic that this is going to happen soon?

We have tried to convince the Chinese owners of small size insurance companies. If they can be convinced that they can make money in one year, they will be deported in the whole united states, all the big insurance companies will follow suit. This is the only way to penetrate the market. The only way is step by step, and focusing on the Chinese populations.

OCAC has discussed its plans with the Department of Health here and are cooperating with them on this. Recently the Executive Yuan passed legislation that has relaxed the rules for foreigners that want to use Taiwan's medical facilities, which has opened a lot of doors. I am very optimistic about OCAC's plans for the future with regards to medical tourism.

Thank you, Minister Wu, for talking to us!

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