Anutin Charnvirakul – Deputy Prime Minister & Minister of Public Health, Kingdom of Thailand



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Anutin Charnvirakul, recently appointed deputy prime minister and minister of public health of Thailand, shares his initial priorities since taking on the role in July 2019. Charnvirakul then goes on to cover the most significant topics impacting Thailand's healthcare ecosystem such as the legalization of medical cannabis, the country's Thailand 4.0 policy, and investment from the pharma industry.

Having been appointed Thailand's new minister of public health this past July, what did you establish as the main priority of your tenure?

My mandate is to render the best healthcare possible for all Thai people. I believe the Thai healthcare system is already in a strong position, therefore we must continue to improve the health awareness and education of our people. Currently, one of our key focus areas is to promote wellness and disease prevention because even the best healthcare in the world is not as effective as staying in good health.

As the first country in Asia to approve the medical use of cannabis, Thailand has taken a very significant position in this emerging area. How do you expect to see this sector

benefit Thailand and its patients?

Cannabis-derived medication will be very useful in the medical treatment of patients who have not responded to other therapies. Thailand is a country with strong agricultural capabilities and if we are able to purify the strands of the plant with minimal toxicity, cannabis is not only another effective medical option for patients, but also beneficial in other areas such as pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, and food supplements. Furthermore, the cultivation of cannabis will have positive impacts on Thailand's agriculture industry. By supporting local healthcare professionals and farmers, we expect cannabis to be another strategic driver for Thailand's overall economy.

What challenges and opportunities do you expect to face in the creation of a Thai medical cannabis landscape?

At this point, the landscape is gradually developing. After legalization, we will have to create access schemes for medical purposes that are still closely monitored by the government. Once the correct framework is in place, we believe that the use of cannabis in negative ways will be reduced as a consequence.

Thailand's Industry 4.0 policy aims to cultivate a stronger value-added economy by encouraging greater innovation and R&D initiatives across several of the country's most important industries – one of which being healthcare. Under this program how do you expect to see Thailand's healthcare system grown and evolve to a new level?

Thailand has never closed the door for any investments, either in the form of industry presence or R&D programs. For example, Thailand's government offers sponsored subsidies to support the many research projects that are ongoing in the country. We strongly believe that Thailand can be a key market for the pharmaceutical industry in the ASEAN region. Due to our excellent universal healthcare coverage, there is a large demand for high-quality products which cultivates a booming ecosystem for the industry.

I would like to mention that our government policy is to prioritize locally produced healthcare products. If technology comes from overseas, as long as there is a local business presence which invests domestically through job creation or manufacturing, we will continuously support the industry players. This way, even multinational companies can enjoy the opportunities created by Thai healthcare demands as long as they are contributing back to our market.

Furthermore, Industry 4.0 plans to further establish Thailand's position as a medical hub within the ASEAN region. What will be the main challenges and essential success factors to achieve this position?

Thailand has already long acted as a medical hub not only the ASEAN region but for all of Asia. We have done an excellent job to create a friendly environment for international patients who want to come to the country and receive treatment. We are also aiming to build an eco-tourism landscape in conjunction with health and wellness. All of our facilities and infrastructure are operating at a high enough level to achieve this ambition. To call ourselves a medical hub is not beyond our reach.

Additionally, our country has advanced medical knowledge and is second to none in terms of treating patients with the utmost quality and care. Thailand is open to all technologies transfers and we welcome the opportunity to explore the most innovative scientific methods of treatment. Furthermore, Thailand can offer care from a simple check-up to advanced procedures at an economical value. Our medical tourists can come to this country not only as patients but travellers as well. Expenses in Thailand are much more affordable, yet have the same standards of quality, as other developed countries.

Collaboration between government authorities and the private industry is essential for a successful healthcare system. What are your thoughts on the respective roles of the public and private sectors in supporting the Thai health ecosystem?

The Thai government has always been willing to support the private industry and flexible in communication, particularly if businesses are aiming to create long-term investments in this country. In terms of healthcare, there is not a major need to collaborative with the private sector in terms of healthcare coverage. Our public healthcare has three segments: the civil service welfare system, Social Security, and the universal coverage scheme. The private sector does not fall into any these categories so they can freely develop and improve their services to be a centre of excellence for patients who are willing to pay a premium service.

What are the strengths of Thailand for the international pharmaceutical and life sciences companies that are operating in Thailand?

We have never closed our doors for companies who want to use Thailand as a base for research and development or even manufacturing activities. The Thai government can provide all kinds of support in terms of tax benefits and import and export promotions. Moreover, innovation-driven investments can enjoy additional privileges from the government.

Thailand is the market where the healthcare and life sciences industries consider to be a strategic destination for value-added investment projects. Furthermore, we have amounted the end-users to support innovation – Thailand's nearly 70 million-strong population generates a strong flow of demand for health products. Other countries in the region may be able to offer more import promotions, but the economies of scale are incomparable to Thailand. These are just a few of the benefits that international investors should consider when looking at the best market to position themselves in the ASEAN region.

The American Magazine *CEOWORLD* just ranked Thailand's healthcare system as the sixth-best in the world. Looking forward, what are the next steps for Thailand to ensure that you do not rest on your laurels when it comes to health?

I believe that Thailand is second to none in terms of the healthcare we provide to our people. Regardless of the ranking, it is not as important as being able to ensure that the best level of care is available to our citizens. Thailand competes with itself in healthcare, not with others. Our ultimate goal is to make sure that all patients are taken care of under the same umbrella.

What legacy would you like to leave as Thailand's minister of public health?

My ambition is to give my all in the position. I am not a medical doctor, but I believe that I can work well with medical professionals and stakeholders. I believe it is my role to do whatever I can to support them in fulfilling their obligations to patients.

Is there any final message you would like to deliver to the international healthcare community on behalf of Thailand?

Welcome to Thailand!

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