



Is There a Doctor in the House?

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The bad news is that while on vacation in Thailand, you need medical treatment. The good news is that at least you're in Thailand.

The above statement certainly holds true in big and medium-sized cities. Thailand has modern hospitals and competent doctors who speak very good English. You may well die on the way to the hospital by traffic accident or just stuck in a traffic jam, but once you arrive at the hospital, the level of medical care will be a rough equivalent to the Western world.

I know many Americans would intuitively reject the notion that a 3rd world country offers equally good or superior medical care as the U.S. First, Thailand is no longer an impoverished 3rd world country. Second, the statement is more of an indictment of the U.S. health care system than anything else.

Please remember that Thailand is a health care destination for many people living in developed countries such as the U.S. Farangs often travel to Thailand for hip replacements, knee surgeries, cataract removal, etc. (the list is endless) because their US medical insurance won't cover the

procedure and the cost is incredibly high to pay for it out-of-pocket. Not so in Thailand.

A Personal Story

One evening in Chiang Mai, Jenny (my wife) developed irregular heart palpitations. I was panicked to say the least. I had to get Jenny to a hospital QUICK!!!. Luckily, we were staying with good friends. We put her in our friend's car and drove straight to the emergency room of a nearby hospital.

Hospital staff immediately came out to the car and I told them what was happening. Within a minute, Jenny was inside the emergency room with a team of nurses setting up an EKG and taking vital signs. An emergency room doctor came and began talking to my wife about the palpitations and her medical history. The EKG and vital signs were normal. The doctor assured me that my wife was not about to die. They did more tests that evening including an MRI.

They kept Jenny in the hospital overnight for observation. (The doctors assured me that these palpitations were benign and not that unusual. (An opinion that was shared by follow-up visits to U.S. doctors.) They took her to a large, private room that had accommodations for me to sleep there also. There was also a large bathroom with shower, an outdoor patio and a small refrigerator stocked with snacks, water and soft drinks! This hospital room seemed more like a hotel.

Early the next morning, a cardiologist came in and discussed the palpitations issue with us. She assured us that everything would be OK, and discharged Jenny. What a relief!

We went down to the hospital's business office to arrange payment. We're completely covered by a California HMO that pays for emergency treatment anywhere in the world. I gave the info to the hospital and they attempted to verify insurance coverage. It was Sunday in the U.S. and verification couldn't be completed until the next day. No problem. The hospital requested that I leave our passports with them and come back tomorrow to finish arranging payment. I was about to go retrieve our passports when Jenny asked how much was the bill. The bill was 8430 baht. That's about \$281 US! I couldn't believe it.

Upon hearing the amount, I simply paid the bill in cash. (I later sent the bill to my HMO and they joyfully sent a reimbursement check.)

Medical treatment in Thailand is very affordable to say the least. I have all my dental and optometry work done in Thailand. The standard of care is just as good (sometimes better) and it's far more affordable. I get my teeth cleaned for \$30 (US) and they do a far more thorough job than in the U.S.

Thai Pharmacies: An important role in health care

Pharmacies and pharmacists have far more authority in Thailand than in the U.S. A Thai pharmacist can sell you many types of drugs and medications that in the U.S. would require a doctor's prescription. Thai pharmacists also will make quick, simple diagnosis and prescribe a medication on the spot.

For instance, if you wake up one morning with some god-awful rash on your body, you can go to a Thai pharmacy, show your rash to the pharmacist and she'll prescribe for you a medication for treatment. You can buy antibiotics over the counter and many other drugs. The Thai pharmacist is more than

willing to discuss your medical symptoms and offer treatment advice, unlike their counterparts in the U.S.

How to see a doctor

If you need to see a doctor in Thailand for any reason, you simply go to a hospital. Thai hospitals are set up to see patients who just walk in. Just go to the main entry of the hospital (not the emergency room) and inquire at the information desk. They'll guide you. You may wait anywhere from 30 minutes to an hour (an average) to see a doctor. The doctor will speak English and the bill will be more than reasonable.

Rural Thai Medical Care

You're closest medical facilities will be small clinics and the staff may not speak very good English. Obviously, the distance to an actual hospital will be greater. Doctors do exist in the smaller towns and often run the clinics. Walk-ins are accepted. If at all possible, try to get to a larger city for medical treatment.

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Date Created

April 2016

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