

Health tourism could boost Jamaica's economy, says doctor

BY DONNA HUSSEY-WHYTE *Observer staff reporter*

CARDIOLOGIST Dr Ernest Madu believes a number of Jamaica's health and economic problems could be solved if proper infrastructure is put in place to establish a health tourism sector on the island.

Dr Madu, chief executive officer at the Heart Institute of the Caribbean (HIC), said that while health tourism is a booming trade for other countries, Jamaica is not benefiting from the millions of patients seeking health care outside of their countries.

"...The most booming trade now is health tourism, but they are not coming to Jamaica, and it's not just because the crime is bad; if they come we have to give them what they need and what is the international standard," he said.

Dr Madu, addressing reporters and editors at this week's Observer Monday Exchange at the newspaper's head office in Kingston, said in order to meet the required standards in health care it would require money for the importation of medical equipment and trained specialists, particularly where it affects heart diseases.

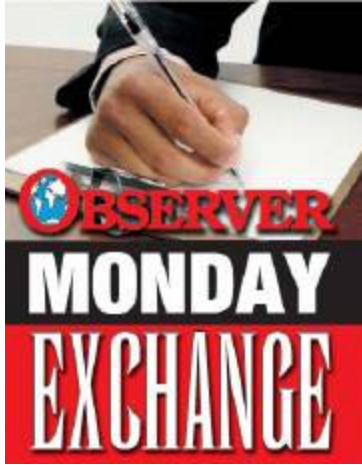
"Jamaica doesn't have it (infrastructure). America doesn't have it. You buy the plane ticket and you go to India or you go to Thailand. So when you have places like India and Thailand projecting \$3.5 billion by 2012 in terms of health tourist income, and then we know that nearly one million Americans left the shores of America last year to go overseas for health treatment, then we have to ask the question, why is it that we have not developed the facilities for them to come to Jamaica?" said Dr Madu.

He said, however, that once the infrastructure is put in place, the problem of access would then have to be addressed.

At the same time, he said that cardiovascular diseases can be treated in Jamaica for 10 per cent of the cost in Miami, United States, noting that the Heart Institute is able to treat most of the heart disease-related cases, but said more centres would have to be established.

"...We still have what I call an exploitative system where poor countries repatriate funds to rich countries because we have not been visionary enough to say we can do this," said Dr Madu. "It's easy for people to say they are trying to raise \$120,000 to send somebody overseas for treatment, but I haven't seen anybody saying they are trying to raise \$12,000 to have the same person get the treatment in Jamaica."

Persons who have taken the risk to set up medical facilities in Jamaica, he said, need to be supported.



Dr Ernest Madu, chief executive officer at the Heart Institute of the Caribbean (HIC), speaking at the Observer Monday Exchange meeting of reporters and editors this week. Beside him is Dr Dainia Baugh, president HIC and chair of the Heart Institute of the Caribbean Foundation. (Photo: Naphtali Junior)