

The Future Scenario of the Health and Wellness Industry in Thailand

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The outlook on health and wellness in Thailand will never be the same as it was before the pandemic. As a middle-income country, the healthcare system in Thailand used to be in the hands of public insurance organized by the governmental sector. On the demand side, healthcare payments for nearly all Thai citizens are covered by one of three schemes, Universal Coverage scheme, the Social Security scheme, or the Civil Servants Medical Benefits scheme. On the supply side, a signal of the continuing expansion of the healthcare market appears in the growth of private healthcare providers. The gap between the 2 sides is being filled with post-pandemic healthcare trends in which people have increased health awareness and more willingness to pay not only for health in the meaning of physical conditions but also wellness and beauty which are creating the extended version of 'healthy'. Changes in the Thai population structure to an aging society is also reshaping the demand patterns in the healthcare market, which will be predominated by nursing homes soon. In addition, urbanization is bringing healthcare decentralization which means the migration of medical centers from large cities to outskirt areas, and also an embracing of alternative medicine and telemedicine into the standard of care. The healthcare industry itself is expected to be one of the main engines driving the economic growth of the country. The scenario seems bright, however, without its own technological innovation, how can Thailand thrive in this future expectation?

The future shape of 'people in Thailand'

Thailand has already transited into an 'aged' society in 2025, which means that more than 20% of its 70-million population is more than 60 years. Ranked as one of the most rapidly aging societies, more than 30% of the Thai population will be senile people within the year 2050. While economic growth is on the upward side, the change in population structure will create a huge gap in labor demand, especially the skilled workers. Thailand will soon have no choice other than to extend its arms to embrace immigrant workers from neighboring countries otherwise it may lose

its competitiveness in foreign direct investment. In addition, enabling infrastructures will attract more digital nomads to the country, particularly to the urban cities near tourist destinations. Considering these scenarios, people in Thailand in the near future are likely to be a mixture of locals and immigrant workers, and long-stay tourists who may also pursue distant online jobs.

Alterations in the population structure might influence a shift in customer segmentation in the healthcare industry in Thailand. The private sector is forecasted to grow substantially and possibly predominate the market in the future. In addition, more market share will go to alternative medical care such as traditional Thai medicine, Chinese medicine, and chiropractic. Health literacy of the new generation is expanding the perceptive meaning of healthcare services from medical treatment to preventive health care, wellness, and even beauty.

Growth of the non-governmental, non-mainstream health cares

In the past, Thailand adopted new medical technologies through university hospitals that played a sandbox role of technology assessors and academic leaders. Health policy and resource distribution were usually governed by the public sector. Private hospitals were adjunctive players that mainly provide luxurious care and received excessive demand from the governmental sector. To date, large private healthcare service providers have extended their network throughout the nation and the neighboring countries. Not only the chain medical service, but such businesses also provide highly specialized care, high-end laboratory networks, and pharmaceutical outlets. As Thai society has been introduced to the role of private medical services in the pandemic years, the market share of the private sector is expected to be increased in the post-pandemic period when the health trend heads upward. At the same time, the governmental sectors, especially university hospitals will adapt themselves to also provide luxurious and waiting-free service in order to compete for high-value customers.

Although Thailand is a developing country in the physical world, the country will be of the global 'technotopia' in the coming decade. With 58 million Facebook accounts in 2022, Thai people rank eighth in the globe in populating online social networks. Such digital urbanization is not limited to large cities considering that 55 million Thais have internet access, and 90% of domestic consumers have experienced cashless payment which was popularized by a recent governmental project, 'Paotung'. With the ability to access information accelerated by the pandemic, Thai people have more awareness regarding their own health and wellness. As a customer, a patient will have an awareness that the right to choose should be on his/her side, not always by the healthcare provider. For example, after getting a clear diagnosis from a specialist in a regional medical center, a patient with benign prostatic hyperplasia might choose to have his surgery performed by the latest technology in a center far away with a willingness to pay out of his own vault and later come back to be followed up by the regional center. The ability to choose with knowledge brings democratization to healthcare governance. Such power shifting will occur not only in medical care but also in the consumption of health-claimed products where consumers are protected by knowledge decentralization. The 'TaWai for health' application (tawaiforhealth.org) is an example of an online platform that helps customers think before purchasing health-related products.

From users to developers in health technology

It is not exaggerated to say that every cutting-edge medical technology is available in Thailand. The problem is

where and how you can access them. Modern imaging studies like positron emission tomography and high-throughput genome sequencing platform are available in large hub cities throughout the country. However, nearly all pieces of medical devices used in this country are imported from manufacturers abroad. It is also fair to say that the health industry in Thailand is dependent as we barely have intrinsic deep technology or successful health technology start-up. One of the significant barriers is the immaturity of the regulatory system provided by the Thai Food and Drug Administration Office and the lack of investors. Moreover, the centralized intellectual property management system is not supportive enough. Innovations are then stuck as primitive prototypes on one side of Death Valley and only a few successfully jump to scale-up manufacturing, commercialization, and real-world application.

Solutions to this problem might be the effort of large public granting agencies that began to provide funds to encourage university inventors to be start-up entrepreneurs for their own innovation. On the other hand, large cooperates began to establish their own research and development and provide endowment funds to gear universities' research in the applicable direction. Although the road remains bumpy, it can be foreseen that Thailand will enter the S-curve of the medical device industry in not too long.

In conclusion, the previous pandemic has proven the capability of health care in Thailand. Together with tourism, healthcare services will be the leading industry of the country in the near future. Challenges are in balancing resources between the public and the private sector, managing equity in health technology accessibility, and promoting entrepreneurship in the health industry.