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A new destination for health-conscious travellers will emerge on the local map, with the opening next Wednesday of the Krung Siam St Carlos Medical Centre and Herbal Spa on the outskirts of Bangkok.

The centre is promoting itself as ``Asia's newest travel destination offering an extraordinary health and herbal spa vacation in exotic Thailand".

Health tourism is a fast-emerging niche market with new facilities mushrooming in many major tourist destinations. As well, there has also been promotion of modern medicine at some of the country's high-tech private hospitals, where check-ups and treatment cost a fraction of what they would in many other countries.

The Tourism Authority of Thailand recently promoted this emerging travel segment through the Thailand Health Travel Mart, which featured 108 local operators and 74 international buyers from Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan, Malaysia, France, England and the United States.

``If you are sick, that means your body can't stand it any longer. It is just telling you that `enough is enough'. Our body is the best machine ever thought up and created, but somehow people don't take good care of it," said Dr Anchulee Yongarnukul, managing director of the St Carlos Group of Health Services.

Amid the modern urban environment with its fast-paced, high-stress lifestyle, the group wants to make people more aware of the importance of a healthy lifestyle and to promote preventive medicine. Health should be thought of as capital, said Dr Suchai Yongarnukul.

``It is high time to take stock of our assets. We have no choice anymore, we must give in," added Dr Anchulee, referring to the harmful aspects of modern urban life with its pollution, lack of physical exercise and tension that affects up to 80 percent of people.

The husband-and-wife medical team _ both renowned worldwide as weight-loss treatment experts for more than 10 years _ have an impressive infrastructure to match their innovative ideas. In addition to the main St Carlos Hospital and St Carlos Laboratories, there are branches at Pradipat, Suttiporn, Sujarit, Charn-Issara and Seacon Square.

The new Krung Siam centre, located on the Pathum Thani-Rangsit Road, eight kilometres north of Bangkok International Airport, represents an investment of 1.2 billion baht. It offers a full range of medical services and facilities, as well as a herbal spa using ancient Oriental blends; cosmetic surgery, plastic surgery, medical check-ups, weight-loss programmes, plus all the facilities associated with a deluxe hotel: swimming pool, sauna, steam bath and the latest fitness equipment.

On the menu of the herbal health spa there are six packages to choose from, ranging from a single day (Head to Toe Revival) to a 28-days Grand Indulgence package. Other packages cover two, three, seven and 14 days.

Each programme starts with a medical check-up and can continue, for example, with an ayurvedic herbal massage, jet-lag massage, cranio-sacral massage, hand and feet pressogalvanic bath or some lotus or botanical baths, to name a few.

Renowned for her work in integrating western medicine with the ancient knowledge of eastern herbal medicine, Dr Anchulee has chosen to give prominence to ancient and well-proven knowledge, whether from India or China, yet leaving room for ultra-modern western methods such as diagnosis.

“The difference is in the software, the way we look at things, not as such in the hardware,” she says, giving examples of how spa treatments could help treat some diseases, or how chemotherapy should be coupled with some herbal treatments in order to alleviate its negative side-effects.

“People do so much to please their external selves: shopping, working hard to amass money and so on, but who really cares about his or her own body?” added Teerawat Jaiprasat, the group's general manager.

The group supports a more global approach to health, which Dr Anchulee believes should be the prevailing trend in the future.

The luxurious Krung Siam St Carlos Medical Centre is already making the most of the current initiative by the Public Health Ministry and the TAT to highlight Thailand as one of the world's newest and best destinations for health tours, both for the high quality of its services and its affordable prices.

Krung Siam is working with local and overseas travel agencies and tour operators to promote its service. European and East European visitors are expected to be among the first foreign guests. Numerous Russian customers who have visited other St Carlos branches for weight-loss treatment are also expected.

In addition to tourists, the centre is also aimed “at any people who understand our methods and are concerned about health, believing in primary prevention,” Dr Anchulee said.